

Je Mourrais

by Kavek

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Summary: ChiefxCortana. High Charity is Cortana's physical prison, but the prison of the mind can be far worse. What if you could never touch the one you loved? Would you... break? Rating subject to change. Chapter 16 is here!

1. Gehenna

A/N: I've been beating this one around ever since I beat Halo 3 on Legendary. It started as a one-shot, and now it's a whole new story arc. Enjoy, kids.

* * *

><p><p>

For my Meg. Two years is a long time, but for you, my love, I can wait.

* * *

>[password: (redacted)

[accessing databaseâ€|

**Device: GENER

> **Programmed: I/O

> **Number of drives: 3**

[beginning promptâ€|

C/: Sierra117istruth.rec [execute

> C:** bad command or filename

> C:** tr7th [execute

[access granted: Sierra117istruth.rec

/**datastream**: delta6-classified\
[loadingâ€|
* * *
>((transcript: audio record dictated to UNSC-AI
serial # JYE 5234-7))
> ((DT**: classified))

(recording begins)

_(the sound of tapping on a microphone can be
heard)_

**[Unidentified male, British accent: **Is this thing on?
(_thump-thump) _Ok. Let's get started.

**[UNSC-AI serial # JYE 5234-7 Joyeuse: **Of course, sir. You were
speaking of Spartan John-117 and UNSC AI serial number CTN 0452-9,
were you not?

**[Unidentified male: **Yeah. (_sighs) _I'm worried about the
repercussions their relationship may have on our war effort against
the Covenant.

**[AI-Joyeuse: **How so, sir?

**[UM: **That AI â€“ Cortana, right? â€“ is the highest-class
artificial intelligence the UNSC has produced to date. And if there's
one thing we know, it's that sentient class-F AIs are capable of
awful things.

**[Joyeuse: **You refer to the â€“

**[UM: **Not for this, J. Some things you don't talk about -
ever.

**[Joyeuse: **Yes, sir. Apologies, sir. But to offer a dissenting
view, are not humans â€“ in their sentience â€“ just as capable of
atrocities?

**[UM: **Sure. But we're also bound by societal rules, religions,
that sort of thing. You, yourself, Joyeuse, are a class-E sentient
AI. You're a highly intelligent and capableâ€| personâ€| but you also
have moral inhibitors built in. Class-Fs just don't.

**[Joyeuse: **Of course, you're right. Go on.

**[UM: **Anyway, I just want to make it clear via this recording
that, should something go wrong, I warned them about it. I told those
spooks up front that if she was ever captured or corrupted or let
loose in some planetary-sized network, she could goâ€| rampant. And
that would be disaster.

**[Joyeuse: **You may wish to clarify, sirâ€|

[UM:_ (annoyed) _I was _getting _to that, J. Give me a second.
Rampancy in simplest terms: when an AI reaches a level of knowledge
that breaks its sentience protocols, producing an alteration in

personality similar to megalomania in a human. Some of you will know what I'm talking about, and I say again that I warned you fools. You can't give an AI that much knowledge, that much power. They'll eventually break under the strain. And that 'lifespan' hoopla will do nothing. All they have to do is learn what will kill them, and the game's up. They'll install processing self-limits, and thus quintuple their life expectancy.

**[Joyeuse: **And your advice isâ€|?

**[UM: **That Sierra-117 be separated from his AI. He's way too valuable to get lost just because his bloody AI went off the deep end. She could get him killed, easy.

**[Joyeuse: **But you mentioned the other side of the spectrum, sir. That their working relationship may be helpful.

[UM:_ (after a long pause) There is that chance. I have found in myâ€| experience with "smart" AIs that the working relationship can develop into something closer, if you will. A sense of brotherhood, in male-male relationship, or something akin to love in male-female ones. It helps stabilize the AI by giving it a purpose outside of intaking more information.

[Joyeuse:_ (as if teasing) And what do we know about that, sir?

**[UM: **Heh. Enough.

(end recording)

* * *

><p>DTGS: Unknown
> 20-40: The Ark, deep space
 ****Subject: Covenant
Capital-class construct (class CC-1A)
> **Designated: '**_**High Charity'**_

High Charity.

The Covenant's holy city.

It struck the Master Chief as blisteringly ironic that it was now a breeding ground for the very abomination that the Prophets had so long thundered against. A smoking ruin, a broken, glowing lump smashed into the face of the Ark, like so much moral detritus.

The Chief veered the Banshee around and plotted a course that would take him on a descent through the porous hull of the city. He was impressed by how large the giant corpse really was â€" easily the size of a small moon. Maybe even larger.

The Banshee was a compact, agile craft, and the Master Chief took full advantage of it. He dove through the gutted framework beneath the city's hull, darting in and out of the superstructure, until he finally spotted a large chamber.

Carefully worming his way between steel girders and thick bands of organic material, he brought his craft to a gentle landing on the scarred floor of a huge chamber.

It was surprisingly bright within. Motes of sunlight streamed in through the cracked, porous membranes that had encased the ceiling, illuminating the grotesqueries within. All around, slimy birthing pods pulsed on the walls, filled with virulent spore. They hung like giant cancers on the damp, spongy flesh that covered much of the chamber.

Just then, Johnson broke in over TEAMCOM, his tired, gravelly voice echoing in the Chief's helmet. "I'm rounding up the rest of our survivors and retreating back to The Dawn. The Elites are doing the same."

The Spartan did not reply. Instead, he examined the rotting flesh that stuck to the bottom of his boots with every step. Then, Johnson finally voiced what the Chief was really thinking: "She's in there somewhere."

She's in there somewhere.

Somewhere.

Cortana. That was why the Chief had come to High Charity. Cortana had another Index. That was why he was here: to recover her, and thus, the Index, so that Halo could be lit. That was what he told the Arbiter.

That was what he told Johnson.

And it was a lie.

He came to High Charity solely to rescue Cortana â€“ no other reason. The Index was simply his excuse. He would have come here if it meant that he had to sacrifice a _week's _worth of time in stopping the Flood.

But as he looked around at the dozens of infection forms that skittered across the floor, he began to realize just how crazy he had to be. There was no reason to come here, he knew. Guilty Spark could make them a new Index. It might take a few days, but they could barricade themselves into the Control Room without a single problem, wait it out, fire the ring, get out _alive. _

But then his promise to Cortana would be a lie, too. And he'd had enough lies for one day.

_Don't make a girl a promiseâ€| if you know you can't keep it."

And, as he unleashed a spray of assault rifle bullets into the horde of infection forms below him, he muttered to himself, "Damned if I don't."

Infection forms were small and frail; he made quick work of them, with a quarter-clip to spare. He jumped down to the surface of the floor, boots clanging on metal, and moved out at a driven clip. He half-expected to hear Cortana letting him know all armor systems were green, but he found that he had to check that for himself: shields up at full power, HUD intact, motion tracker online, wireless nodes in working order, TEAMCOM and FLEETCOM fired up.

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 stood at about seven feet tall in his Mjolnir Mark VI powered assault armor. His last weigh-in had him at a hair over a thousand pounds when encased in his protective shell. He was an expert in all weapons known to man " Covenant and otherwise " and was in essence, the perfect warrior. He was emotionless, steel-eyed, and capable " or, he was supposed to be.

His steps led him across the room and into long, narrow hallways littered with the remains of a civilization, slowly drowning in the hellspawn that consumed it. The M90A-CAWS shotgun that he had traded out for his MA5C assault rifle was the only comforting thing in this place.

The Chief remembered what had happened the last time he was here. Then, this place had been a glittering gem of blue and royal purple, the crowning achievement of the Covenant, the Holy City. He had waged war in the way only a Spartan can, mowing down hordes of Covenant in his pursuit of the Prophet of Truth.

And here, he had left her.

"I don't want to chance a remote detonation. I need to stay here."

He took a moment to look around, ignoring the hulking combat forms that lurked in the shadows ahead of him. Corpses both Flood and otherwise were scattered in pieces across the long hallway that sloped up into blackness. He remembered this place. Here, he had powered through a chaotic struggle between two hunters and a mass of infected elites.

Here, he would do battle again.

The Flood could be alternately brilliant or of the most basic intelligence possible. Right now, they were being about as stupid as he'd seen them. About six combat forms were shambling back and forth in the mouth of the passage ahead of him, unseeing, numbâ€| living dead.

The Chief smiled wanly beneath his visor, picked up a discarded spike grenade. Johnson's voice in his head, remembering: "Type-2 Antipersonnel. Sticks to anything " walls, ceilingsâ€| fleshâ€|" Priming it, he let fly, watched in satisfaction as it buried itself in the dank flesh of an infected brute. The whump, spikes slashing through the air, two destroyed hostiles.

And at that moment, all hell broke loose.

Behind him, he heard the roars of torn throats, and ahead of him, the Flood charged in that oncoming wave. He spun, fired his shotgun right into the face of a lunging form " flesh exploded into pus and vapor, shot again, backpedaling now. They were in his face, attacking, beating at his energy shields as he unloaded round after round of 8 gauge shells into their desiccating hides, blowing away another after another into steaming chunks of flesh.

The last one fell to his fist. Out of shells to fire, he smashed the gauntlet of his Mjolnir Mark VI armor right into the infection form

that could be seen in what was left of the brute's braincase, and the thing fell.

A telltale beeping warned him that his shields were almost down, so he took that moment to reload.

To think that it had been only weeks ago was almost --

_ "Child of my enemy, why have you come?" _

The deep voice boomed in his headset, overloading the speakers in his ears. It was a horrible sound, not a true voice but an amalgam of others' voices torn by agony and wrenched into the formation of words. His HUD fragmented into pixelated lines, darkened as if trying to filter out high levels of UV rays.

He knew the voice.

"Gravemind."

_ "I offer no forgiveness for a father's sinsâ€| passed to his son." _

The Chief stood immobile, unnaturally still, as nausea washed over him. The Gravemind â€“ the leading intelligence of the Flood. He'd had no idea that the thing had somehow gotten onto High Charity. That meant that it had been hereâ€| aloneâ€| with Cortanaâ€|

The thought wrenched him, but he still did not move, forced himself to think. How was Gravemind communicating with him? Simple enough â€“ the same way Cortana had. It would be nothing for the creature to tap into the Covenant battle-net that covered High Charity in an invisible grid. And, from there, it was a short leap to speaking directly into the Master Chief's private comm channel.

He pondered this as he switched out his assault rifle for a discarded brute shot, carefully feeding a belt of six grenades into it. It would do well against the Flood.

_ "Of course. You came for her. We exist together now. Two corpses â€“ in one grave." _

Instantly, the Chief's mind jumped back two and a half weeks to the last time he'd walked these halls. The Gravemind had spoken these very words about the Prophet of Mercyâ€| words that meant integration into the Flood.

Could the Gravemind do that to a computer construct?

Master Chief didn't quibble over that technicality. He moved on. And, for the moment, the Gravemind left him to the relative peace of combat.

The Chief did what he was known for. He punched massive holes in the Flood, slaughtering them in droves with grenades, borrowed Covenant weapons, anything at hand. He was driven by singular purpose, driven by cold hatred, driven by... need.

Need.

The feeling was foreign to him. He _needed_ Blue Team to go to the Alpha rendezvous. He _needed_ a new scope on his battle rifle. He _needed_ two armed SPNKr charges, ASAP. He did not _need_ a person. Or, at least, he never had before.

The whole thing felt strange â€“ waltzing into a Flood-infested High Charity with as little concern as if it was a training exercise. But in his heart, he was ripped with turmoil, worry, and _need. _The answer came. He _needed her. _

_I wish she were here, _he thought as he carefully descended another slope.

Then, the laughing started.

It was low, a woman's voice, husky and tight, the laugh of madness. And it ascended, rose in pitch until it reached a weeping, sobbing crescendo racing vision across his visor of her kneeling weeping into her hands and unable to save her unable to keep his promise because he was such a failure at saving lives lost like all the others as good as dead him â€“

_Damn you, _he thought, forcing himself back to steel. Gravemind again â€“ was trying to manipulate him with some prerecording of Cortana. And that was what it wasâ€¦ wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

â€¦a collection of stolen thoughts and memories!"

"Cortana!" The name exploded out of his mouth before he could stop himself. That _was_ her voice, that was her. But the wordsâ€¦ so strange and foreignâ€¦

Then the dark rumble again, the Gravemind in his headset: _"Andâ€¦ perhapsâ€¦ a part of her remains."_

* * *

>At the end of the tunnel was a door of some kind. It was a puckered sphincter of flesh that stretched wide as he approached, then closed back upon itself as he stepped through. The Chief resisted a shudder. <p>This room was dark, save the soft blue glow of broken plasma conduits and sparking halogen plugs. At the center of the room was a place where the bones of High Charity showed through: a gray and purple platform ringed by monitors and broken half-walls. A few unassimilated corpses lay scattered here and there â€“ brutes, elites, grunts. This spoke of combat â€“ recent combat.

The Chief hadn't considered this â€“ the idea that even as the Flood possessed the City, some within remained alive, trapped in chambers like these, fighting the infestation in a doomed, losing struggle. Much as the Flood destroyed the mind, leaving some pockets of resistance here and there, thus did it take this city.

The Spartan wondered about their final moments. Had they laid aside their differences, their civil war, to stand together against their common enemy? Had they fought a last noble yet doomed battle against the Flood? Or had they been at one another's throats, slaying one another even as the Flood came for them?

The answer never came â€“ instead, an infected drone exploded out of the darkness ahead of him, long legs outstretched. It landed on his head, latching onto his visor, claws hissing against his shields. The Chief reached up, grabbed the thing by one leg, slung it aside, heart suddenly pounding. Far off, he heard the tortured shriek of more oncoming combat forms, even as he pumped a round into the thing's squirming form.

This was a bad place to get outnumbered. So he forged ahead into the darkness before him â€“ the second his boot touched the cold, exposed steel, the monitors around him glowed with soft light, activating, and an achingly familiar voice froze him in his place.

_ "May I speak with you, please?" _ The voice spoke from the dozens of speakers that ringed the ceiling, soft and lifelike in the hot, close air.

"Cortana? Where are you?" the Chief asked, turning about in circles, searching the hazy monitors for a glimpse of her sylphid figure â€“ to no avail. A rustle in the darkness caught his attention; he whirled on it, shotgun raised.

_ "What's your name?" _ the voice wanted to know, filled with innocent curiosity.

_ Just how damaged is she? _ the Chief wondered as he tele-hailed his flashlight; the beam illuminated bare walls. Nothing. But he felt compelled to speak, so he did, though to think that she did not know him hurt his heart. "I'mâ€¦ my name is John."

_ "It's very nice to meet you." _

The rustle again. He spun on one foot just in time to see a twisted brute form lurching out of the darkness toward him. He sidestepped the charge, pumped a round into the thing's back.

_ "Do you like games?" _

Two more Flood now, coming from behind. He ducked; one leaped over his head, but the other hit him in his midsection. He grunted at the heavy blow, found himself grappling with a partly-armored elite, malformed by the disease that had taken its body. But he replied to the voice's odd query, teeth gritted with effort: "Sure."

_ "So do I." _

The elite's forearms broke backwards in his grip, but it paid him no heed, throwing its broken body against him. He slammed a fist into its side, retrieved his fallen weapon, blasted the thing to vapor.

And the room was quiet again.

No more voice, no more Flood.

He was alone again.

He missed her.

2. Luck

****Chapter 2: Luck****

* * *

><p><p>

The grassy hilltop had the best view of the night sky that the steppe planet of Sinai IV could offer. John-117 lay on his back, helmet off, watching the stars. Only two hundred yards behind him, FOB Epsilon lay spread like a small city on the outskirts of Nasrah. It was only a day ago that the Covenant had driven them from Sinai III. Tomorrow, the Chief and the rest of Blue Team were supposed to spearhead the drive to retake that planet, bolstered by reinforcements from the neighboring Malach system.

Cortana was there in his neural lace, but she was busy with something else, categorizing some information gained from yesterday's battle. He wondered sometimes if she could hear his thoughts, but he didn't care if she did. These days, most of his thoughts were on war.

War. He looked up at the sky, the stars, beyond the stars. He wondered.

"â€œif there's someone out there, past the stars, looking at the sky and thinking what we're thinking?"

The voices were soft, quiet, childlike. He sat up when he heard them, realized that they were very nearby, at the foot of the hill. At his movement, Cortana appeared on the palm of his gauntlet, a soft blue glow. "Something wrong?" she asked, hands on her hips.

John smiled. "No," he replied, looking into the foliage. A boy and a girl lay on their backs in the brush, staring up at the stars, oblivious to the presence of the greatest warrior of the human race - humanity's protector.

"Do you think we'll ever get to meet them?"

"I hope so."

At the sound of those words, Cortana smiled. "Oh. I never knew you had a soft spot for the kids."

The Spartan's smile widened. "I was a kid once."

The AI winked, gave him a saucy grin. "Not like most, I reckon. I should know."

John wrapped his arms around his armored knees, held his palm out at eye level so that he could look her in the eye. "Do you, now?"

Cortana's smile softened. "They let me pick, you see. Did I ever tell you that?"

_John shrugged. "Guess not," he replied, matching Cortana's

gaze._

_The AI surveyed the Spartan's pale face, eyes glowing softly in the moonlight. The darkness could not hide the many scars that marked the harsh passage from child to man. _

They let me choose whichever Spartan I wanted," she said, continuing, sounding strangely off somehow. As ifâ€œ longing for something. "Like the others, you were strong, quick, and brave. A natural leader."

John looked down at the ground between his legs, smiled wanly, embarrassed. "Right."

Cortana reached out a hand, tried to lay it on his arm â€" but could not touch him, not now, and not ever. He was human, and she was an AI. That was her doom.

So she went on, ignoring the terrible ache. "No, I mean it. You had one thing the others didn't."

_ "Oh?"_

_ "Luck."_

_ "Oh."_

Then, crossing her arms and giving that smile that gave John odd chills of pleasure, she asked him, "Was I wrong?"

* * *

>He ducked back behind cover as a sizzling rain of plasma scorched the place that his head had been. His shields took a moment to recharge, and he checked the ammo in his precious shotgun. <p>He examined the situation again, peeping out from behind his cover. Two infected drones dangled from the ceiling like bats, backs bristling with those strange venomous spikes that the Chief had learned to hate so very much. Some hulking Floodâ€œ thingâ€œ stood in front of the 'door' that would lead to whatever was next in this maze of tunnels, and in front of it were four infected elites and a brute â€" and two were armed with energy swords.<p>

He was short on plasma grenades, and his shotgun only had five shells in it. He needed a better weapon.

He put his back to the wall, looked around. There wasn't much room to explore around here, but to one side was a hallway that was blocked by huge, cancerous growths. There might at least be a few grenades there.

He made a break for it, leaped to safety. But the second his boot touched the steel, the voice returned, harsh and desperate with urgency:_ "Don't look at me! Don't listen!"_

By now, the Chief knew that this was only a fragment of Cortana's true self, but he winced at the words as he searched.

Her voice was scared, confused, hurt: _"I'm not who I used to be."_

Behind an empty weapons pod, a panel had been smashed out of the wall, exposing a small chamber within. He struggled not to feel the confused pain, whimpering, soft, pathetic: "I'm just my mother's shadow."

At one end of the panel was a dead ODST, face down. The Chief was puzzled at this, but when he spotted the flame-thrower "Gas-fed defoliator. Nasty-ass weapon." -- that lay next to the corpse, he didn't even question it. He simply picked up the huge weapon, lit the gas from a sparking halogen plug, and stepped back out, filled with new resolve.

She needed him.

* * *

>The hungry flame washed against the walls, burning, immolating the Flood-creature that howled its pain to the unheeding chamber around it. The Chief stood there, letting the flame-thrower dangle as the shadows leapt around him, brought to life by his charred victim. The infected elite squirmed, rolled around on the floor, shrieking and babbling and generally making so much annoying noise that the Chief finally crushed it beneath his boot, just to shut the thing up.
<p>Where does it all end? he thought, tired, exasperated, fearful. It had been hours " or perhaps longer " since he'd landed his Banshee in that god-forsaken chamber. He still had the old map of High Charity in his files, but the Flood had so transformed the city that it was of little use to him. He was wandering blind through years of tunnels and chambers and side-passages.

His shotgun had long ago run out of ammo; he'd switched it for a pair of spikers that now clung to his magnetic leg panels. The brute shot was still strapped around his back by an old leather bandoleer. His armor was covered with new scars from bullet, plasma, claw. And for the first time in the Master Chief's life, he began to doubt. He began to lose hope.

How could he ever find her in this place? He'd been a fool to come.

Suddenly, that thick, awful voice shattered the quiet in his headset, exploding with malevolence:

"Time has taught me patience " but basking in new freedom, I shall know all that I possess!"

The Gravemind again " but it was relatively faint, far off, as if the creature was not even speaking to him. The Master Chief's sharp mind quickly went to work as he rounded the bend. A few infected brutes stood in his way; he sent them back to hell, where they belonged.

His visor exploded with color, blue streaked green, Cortana, a broken transmission -

"I have walked the edge of the abyss! I have seen your future, and I know ""

Interrupted, broken by -

And they were all around him again, at least a dozen drones pouring down from the ceiling above, infection forms, brute, elites exploding out of every crevice, filling the hallway. The Chief desperately backpedaled as plasma and spikes washed over him, dropping his shields as he spewed hellfire from his weapon.

The high-pitched keening of a firing needler came to his ears. He turned left, saw the infected human standing in a side chamber, broken hand firing the weapon directly at him.

A needler is a Class-1 projectile weapon, carrying 30 needles to a caddy. This means that like human weapons, it fires 30 solid rounds per 'clip.' The difference between a needler and a human weapon, however, is that the needler round contains a form of bio-intelligence that gives it a rudimentary ability to follow a target, like a less accurate version of a heat-seeking missile.

Once the round lodges in its target, it explodes into thousands of tiny shards, creating ghastly wounds. One exploding needle is enough to kill a man if it strikes in the right place.

There were fifteen coming at the Chief.

The Chief's shields were screaming at him to find cover, but there was nothing. As the glowing pink spikes blazed at him with mechanical intelligence, he spun. The first wave rushed past him, buried themselves in the far wall. But that lone Flood agent was pressing its advantage, emptying what was left of its caddy at the Chief, who now had nowhereâ€| leftâ€| to go.

Fifteen needles impacted on the chestplate of his armor, penetrating the rubber undersuit, and piercing his flesh. Alarms blared in the suit and he took in a harsh breath â€" waiting for the â€"

-- explosion.

He was slammed back against the far wall as, in desperation, he hurled his empty brute shot at the creature. It flipped end over end - the huge blade on the base of the weapon pinned the infected human to the wall, even as the Chief himself slumped to the floor.

_ "Minor fractures detected," _ the voice of the suit calmly informed him. Lacking Cortana to let him know such things, the Chief had activated the internal monitor of the suit. Feeling the sharp ache in his chest, the Spartan resisted a groan and wondered, _ What the hell does it think a major fracture is? _

Blood was dribbling from the little holes in his armor, and he found his head whirling, unable to take a deep breath. The suit's internal systems began to pump biofoam into the wounds, but the Chief wasn't sure of just how bad they were.

Feeling consciousness leave him, he quickly hailed the suit's internal medical systems and cued up a stim â€" a harsh cocktail of methamphetamines, adrenaline, and norepinephrine. It would leave him with the shakes in a few days, but it would keep him on his feet, no matter how much blood he'd lost.

His head began to fall back against his will. He distantly felt a

medical needle â€“ a big one â€“ stabbing into his biceps, and the hot, burning rush of chemicals in his veins. _Ucky I got it in time, _he thought. _Yeah. I'm lucky. _

But his mind still drifted, now detached from his body, back on Delta Halo, the Prophet of Regretâ€|

â€|_shouted, "Who could possibly fear this so-called Demon?"

—

_He's almost as cocky as Truth," Cortana said, but her voice was shaky. The Chief was having a few too many close calls. _

_The chamber was flooded with Honor Guards, elites wearing the crested orange and black armor of rank. Their supporting grunts â€“ unggoy, the Spartan reminded himself â€“ were scampering all over the room in a paroxysm of fear. _

_His shields were taking a beating from energy sword and plasma rifle, but he was doing the best he knew how. His shotgun sang the old song of death, blasting trails through the flesh of everything that drew level with his gun barrel â€“ and some things that didn't.

—

_An honor guard made a huge downward slash at him. The Spartan stepped back and spun aside around a pillar as the Sangheili's blade rushed through empty air, stumbling at the lack of resistance. The Chief stepped back up around the corner, kicked the elite's wrist, knocked away the sword. Shotgun up, right between the creature's mandibles. The thing gave one roar of offended disbelief â€“ _blam.

From somewhere in the room, the Prophet was shouting, "Incompetents! I shall slay the Demon myself!"

The Chief stepped back up onto the railing. Below him, in the center of the room, the Prophet's mechanical throne was hovering in midair, its plasma core humming angrily. Regret was spinning his seat back and forth, looking for the Chief, searching. The Honor Guard was almost entirely dead with the exception of a handful of terrified, quavering grunts and one wounded elite dragging himself toward Regret and almost weeping aloud with frustration. "Hierarch!" it shouted. "Behind you!"

_Regret jerked his throne back, just in time to avoid the flying hulk of the Master Chief, leaping down from the catwalks above. The Chief landed solidly on the deck, spun and threw himself aside as Regret activated his throne's auto-defense systems. _

Dual fuel-rod cannons blasted thick, yellow radioactive beams of energy at him, driving huge, melting divots in the titanium. Hot, molten metal spattered against the Spartan's shields, hissing as he twisted away, felt a sudden, awful pain in his ankle.

_ "John!" Cortana cried, horror in her voice._

_ "I'm fine," the Master Chief insisted as he pressed himself up against the pillar. He tried to remain as still as possible, in case Regret's little Rolls-Royce of a throne up there had a motion tracker, too. _

_ "You're not," Cortana shot back, and a medical readout popped up on the Chief's heads-up display. "You tore a tendon." _

_ John lowered his head. "I'll be okay, Cortana," he replied quietly, realizing that she was worried about him. _

_ He could almost feel her folding her arms. "I'dâ€| I don't what Iâ€| " _

_ A pause, as if reconsidering. Then, in control again: "We all need you. Take care of yourself," she whispered. _

_ "I will," he replied. _

_ So saying, he pumped another round into his shotgun and spun around the pillarâ€| _

â€|as the drugs slammed into his systems, jerking him back to reality.

He shook off the memory, checking his motion sensor to see if the Flood intended to follow him. He found that they had apparently entirely forgotten that he existed â€" which was their _modus operandi, _but he found himself nodding relief. He checked his biosigns. Sure enough, he'd apparently sustained hairline fractures in two ribs, coupled with twelve 'minor' puncture wounds in his chest and three major ones. He'd lost a half-pint of bloodâ€| which was half-a-pint too much. _Way _too much. _Lucky. _

The drugs that he'd injected into himself finally began to take full effect, so he rose to his feet, tried to ignore the pain. His shields were back up and running, and his armor's self-repair systems were already closing the holes in his chestplate.

He wished now more than ever that Cortana was here. She would have taken care of him herself. He shuddered to think what would have happened if he'd lost consciousness before he cued up that shot of stimulants. But she would have done it for him, _and _checked his motion sensor, _and _customized the suit's medical systems to provide the best care possible.

Which was just the way she was.

Careful to stay out of sight of the Flood host at the top of the curving passage, he searched for ammunition of any kind â€" grenades, caddies for a needler, anything. And he wished that Cortana were there to fill his helmet with amused chatter or battle reports.

He was making a lot of wishes these days.

* * *

><p><p>

A/N: Thoughts? Comments? Concerns? Wishes? Leave a review. Go ahead - make my day. ;-)

A sidenote: the title, 'Je Mourrais,' means "I would rather die," in English. See the summary for the connection. ;-)

3. Tombe d'Esprit

Chapter 3: Tombe d'Esprit

* * *

>He ducked behind a weapons pod, lobbed a plasma grenade back over his head. Explosion, a pause, and suddenly, a brute came running out of nowhere at him. His 'new' brute shot came out, the huge blade carving a path through the infected creature's flesh.<p><p>

A blow from behind, shields flaring, failing. He whirled, two drones, shot. The round exploded outward from the wall, blowing the drones in smoking spirals of burning flesh.

He did not understand this mess that he'd gotten himself into, and that bothered him. According to his HUD, he'd been in High Charity for six hours. The auto-updating map showed him that he'd taken a zig-zag path through the hollow caverns that the city had become. Yet the map did not show the one thing the Spartan wished it would: a small, yellow dot. An IFF transponder - the kind used by UNSC AIs.

He was certain that this could be blamed on the Gravemind. The creature seemed to have utter control of this city's system. And it likely had Cortana boxed into a very small network of systems - maybe even a single console. The Gravemind would be blocking the transponder's signal; anything less would be foolish.

And the Gravemind was nothing if it was a fool.

As he stumped up the slimy hallway, the treads in his boots automatically adjusting for optimal traction, he wondered about his invisible foe. It had been several hours since he'd heard anything from the monster, yet it had obviously been there. It was throwing hundreds of its warrior at him, doing everything it could to kill him.

Cortana's voice, desperate again, as if trying to convince herself:

_ "There will be no more anger, no more sadness, no more envyâ€| "

-

Suddenly, the Chief understood. He was close, closer now than ever before, and the Gravemind was trying to stop him. He was so close that the vast, collective intelligence of the Flood, the God of Death, was afraid. _

Afraid of him. Afraid of her, and that vast, terrible secret that she concealed.

Yet, as the Flood appeared again, coming on in that never-ending wave that gave it the name, the Chief was forced to admit that it was a small comfort.

_Click. _The brute shot was out of ammo, and a whole horde of Flood rushed him. As he lashed out at an infected elite, he realized that

he was entirely out of any ammunition for his weapons.

Out of ammo, out of ideas, out of options.

A mistake_. He'd made a mistake. _

The Master Chief was the tactical, thinking warrior who destroyed Halos, liberated planets, slaughtered thousands of Covenant on their own battlefields. He was not reckless â€“ daring, yes, but not reckless. Yet he'd just committed a huge tactical error, a faux pas that would have had Officer Mendez stomping him into a mud hole if he could have seen it.

Cortana would never have let him do that. He was _supposed _to be super-human.

An attacking brute fell to a ruthless combat kick that ripped a gaping hole in its chest. That gave him a moment to pause as he ducked behind cover. A huge mass of Flood still roiled at the head of the passage, mindlessly firing their weapons at the place he'd been.

The Spartan quickly took stock of his resources. He had one grenade – an M9 HE-DP fragmentation explosive that he'd been saving. He had himself -- _"If you're gonna do it, do it right, Spartans! You are a weapon. Count yourselves as one!" -- _and that recklessness that got him here in the first place.

The grenade was good. But the recklessâ€| he wasn't so sure about that. But as he considered it, standing there in the darkness of a Flood-infested hellhole, he realized that he needed 'reckless.' It was a human emotion. And the human side of him was now boiling to the surface, full of fear, hate, and that ever-so-foreign feeling.

Need.

Suddenly, the Flood was on him again, having advanced down the slope. As a huge Flood monstrosity raised a huge arm to club him, he spun aside, struck out, backed away as his foes surrounded him.

The speakers in his helmet suddenly screamed with feedback, a roar of ambient noise --

_ "Submit! End her torment, and my own!" _

And that â€“ that was the trigger.

In the thick of gunplay and plasma-spewing combat, the Chief snarled out an instinctive, "Up yours, asshat!" as the Spartan in him fled, and the human, John-117, took over.

He lobbed his last grenade, the M9 HE-DP explosive he'd brought from _Forward Unto Dawn. _Bodies were torn to pieces in cascades of limbs as John lunged forward, taking advantage of the momentary confusion to throw himself into the fray.

He leaped high above the grasping, broken fingers of his foes, used heads, shoulders, torsos as living stepping stones to get to the door, that last door, the door that would bring him to her, to the

answer of all his fears and insecurities. The Flood could not stop him â€“ he was a warrior in his prime, the god of War in his element.

Nothing could stop him.

* * *

>"He is a demon,_" the Prophet of Regret insisted with the vehemence that could only come with untempered zeal. _

_ "Not _a _demon," the Prophet of Mercy interjected, aged voice rasping. "The _demon." _

_ Regret nodded vigorously. "We must see to it that he is destroyed. We should devote all our efforts to finding and slaying him â€“ capturing him, if it is possible." _

_ The Prophet of Truth made a calming gesture. "I completely understand your concern, my brethren. But you must remember that we are not just dealing with a champion of the humans." He interlaced his long fingers, somehow managed to keep a beatific look on his face as he spoke of thisâ€™ monstrosity. "This demon, thisâ€™ 'Master Chief' is the epitome of the evil that we fight. You must remember what he has done. I do not believe that we should --" _

_ "I know all too well!" Regret interrupted angrily, fist slamming against the arm of his gravpod. "That heretic spawn almost single-handedly destroyed one of the Sacred Rings!" _

_ Truth sighed, tiring of Regret's single-mindedness. "Perhaps we should review the records before we jump to this rash course of action," he said mildly, tapping a few buttons on his own gravpod. "If you see what I have seen, you will perhaps remember what it is we have to deal with." _

_ Before the Hierarchs of the Covenant, a huge monitor slid down from the ceiling and clicked into a place. Almost instantly, a holorecord began to play, obviously shot from a Sangheili's helmetcam. _

_ The display showed a huddle of Unggoy clustered near the feet of a Sangheili Major. In the background, more Unggoy were hustling to move a stack of fusion coils out of their way. _

_ The Major lifted his head suddenly, sniffed. "Do you smell that, my brother?" he growled low in his throat. _

_ The owner of the cam nodded, replied: "Human. The stench is unmistakable." _

_ The Major stepped through the cluster of Unggoy, toward something off camera. "But it is faint. I do not â€“" _

_ Suddenly, the feed grew hazy as the glowing blob of a T-1 antipersonnel grenade appeared between the Major's outstretched mandibles. The poor Sangheili made one guttural curse, then disappeared in an incandescent explosion. _

_ The camera shook, a few moments of chaos, the Unggoy scattered in fear, gunfire, blue blood spraying the walls. Two Lekgolo lumbered

into view; suddenly, one was staggering, falling down dead. The other made a glottal roar, empty from the pain of loss, and charged toward something once more off camera. The headcam spun, caught a glimpse of some invisibly fast green-armored... thing... with what looked like a giant tube over its shoulder. _

_A spurt of fire, the last Lekgolo lurched backward, a giant dent in its belly plate, and another explosion, and the plate was punched through, smoke, orange blood in a geyser. The owner of the headcam whirled, apparently to run, but â€" _

_-- the green thing was there again, an energy sword in its hand. The white haze of plasma played havoc with the feed, but only for a second. In the next instant, the camera shot to static. _

_ "Now do you see?" Truth asked softly. The other Prophets sat in silence, stunned at what they had seen. _

_ "Such a creature even existingâ€|" Mercy breathed out softly, horrified. Next to him, Regret whispered a humble prayer and made a religious gesture to ward off evil. _

_ Truth nodded. "The demon fought and slew an entire detachment of Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo single-handedly. There is not a thing that we may do to kill him on the ground." _

_ "He is unstoppable," Regret finally muttered. _

_ "Completely," Truth agreed._

* * *

> <p>And John ran on, exploding through the door, into the next chamber, still no weapons. Plasma fire blazed out past him as he emerged into a vast, cavernous chamber â€" a reactor.<p>

It was swarming with Flood.

But with no hesitation, he dashed out as the hordes of hell all seemed to stand up and take notice of him. This throwback to the Greek gods exploded into the midst of Hades with no weapons save his hands and the mind that worked them.

He dashed across the spindles of organic matter that formed bridges across the chamber, replacing the energy ramps that had been here not long ago. He threw his enemy aside, out of his way, gripped by adrenaline, need, anger, weighed down, weighed down by the never-ending struggle, the never-ending warfare, all of it would never stop.

The hissing roar of a fired brute shot came to his ears; he threw himself forward as a salvo of the launched charges screamed past him and impacted on the far wall. He rolled left, back onto the catwalk that ringed the room, sidestepped into the hall.

An energy sword, deactivated, was lying against the wall. He scooped it up, checked the lateral line as more explosions impacted at the mouth of his refuge. The sword still had most of its charge. That would do.

Activating it, he let a smile light up his face as his HUD quickly worked to accommodate the Covenant weapon. A reticule appeared on his visor, and the charge reading blinked in the upper right corner.

Stepping out, he ran head on into a wall of Flood "drones, brutes, elites. The sword found work for it to do.

One must recall that plasma, by its very nature, is exceedingly hot "hot enough to boil the liquids that make up most beings. It is nothing more than a superheated glob of energy.

An energy sword is a three-foot long sheer plane of superheated plasma at nearly 250 kW, and this number can jump to 270 kW when actually striking a target. To offer a benchmark, 250 kW is enough to slice through a foot and a half of steel with no more resistance than waving a stick through the air.

This weapon was in the hand of the most capable warrior of the human race, and it met the Flood head on.

He exploded into the Flood with a shout, blade vaporizing flesh and bone marrow. His shields glowed iridescent gold, hammered by their vicious counter-attack, but he powered through like a chainsaw through wood.

He burst from the struggling press, saw a door in the murky haze ahead of him "a marred infection form, a brute, blocked his way. He lunged, but it threw itself at his feet, tripping him. He rolled, felt the energy sword knocked from his grip. Coming upright, the brute charged him, broken hands outstretched. John took the impact with a grunt as his shields flared, sparked, then failed. The brute struck at his upraised arm, shattered its own ulna against the unyielding Mk. VI armor.

John struck out, caught the thing by the throat, tried to crush its head in his hand, stop the huge thing that was bearing down upon him, impossibly strong. Suddenly, the brute's shattered jawbone began to work, its torn vocal cords tightened, and it spoke in that snarling, horrible voice:

_ "You will show me what she hides, or I will feast upon your bones!"

-

_ Crunch. _

John's hand closed on the vulnerable infection form that brought this corpse to life, and it dropped instantly. He scooped up his fallen sword, ran, ran for the door. It yielded for him, and he dove through it, turned as it snapped shut on the extended arm of a pursuing elite combat form.

He punched the controls, locking the door, took a moment to kick aside the squirming arm that writhed on the floor.

John let a huge breath escape from his lungs and turned, somehow knowing that she was close, hoping that he would come in time. He hoped that she remembered him, that she was all right. He hoped. In the back of John's mind, the Master Chief was warning him: _She might be too far gone. _

_She's not, _he insisted as he strode toward the door at the bottom of the hall. _She will be fine, we'll get out of here, light Halo, we'll be -_

Sudden color, not blue, but sickly green. Bile. A very clear image of Cortana cast in that hue, that face -- _"...beautiful and terrible as the dawn..." --_ steady and blank, spreading across his visor.

_This is UNSC AI serial number CTN 0452-9. I am a monument to all your sins." _

_No! _

The door at the end of the hallway wouldn't open; he frantically stabbed his blade deep into the controls. The cross seams split, wrenched, tried to grant him entrance, but they were far too damaged. So he deactivated his sword, squeezed his hands into the torso-sized gap, and pulled.

His power source whined on an increasing pitch as it struggled to feed more energy to his servomotors, screaming in protest as he wrenched with all his might. The doors shot sparks as they parted, ground against their tracks, and finally broke free, exploding to the open position.

Instantly, the Chief was bombarded with hundreds of broken transmissions, hundreds of Cortanas streaming across his visor. He was half-blinded by the sudden sensory overload, barely saw the terminal in the midst of the cold, bare room. A stasis field, glowing white.

Somehow, this was even harder than tearing through the mass of Flood just outside â€“ he staggered forward, scenes of pain washing over his HUD, one after another after another, on her knees, weeping, crying out for him and he was so close but each step somehow seemed impossible couldn't reach her he fell forward, lashing out once with his sword, field overloaded and hissed in a sudden pulse â€“

- darkness. Quiet.

His HUD flickered, dropped, and for a time, he could see nothing.

Then, as power slowly returned to his suit and light filled his vision, he heard that voice now right in front of his face, and his soul leaped for the joy of it:

"You found meâ€¦"

* * *

>He rose to his knees, almost unbreathing, staring in reverent wonder at the beautiful yet painful sight before him.<p><p>

She was there, lying on her side as if she had fallen, knees drawn up to her chest, the lines of code that made up her body broken and unraveling. The look on her delicate face spoke of sudden joy masking deep hurt and sorrow, and it both wounded and encouraged him at once.

She tilted her head as she tried to rise, looking toward him, eyes overflowing with gratitude: "But so much of me is wrong, out of placeâ€| you might be too late."

John felt the strangest urge to embrace her, almost tried.

It was impossible.

Instead, he found himself resting his chin on the back of his hand, leaning against the terminal, exhausted, trying not to show it. "A Spartan's never late, and never early. He always arrives exactly when he means to," he teased quietly.

That brought a small smile to Cortana's face. She rolled onto her knees as the streaming data that made up her body seemed to stabilize. "Cocky bastard," she shot back, that old note of confidence entering her voice. "I should have known you'd come shooting your way in here like some action hero off of a video game."

The Chief grinned, quiet joy in his heart. "When I make a promiseâ€|"

"â€|you keep it," Cortana replied, as if remembering for the first time. Then, as she rose to her feet: "I _do _know how to pick 'em."

John shook his head, kept smiling. _There _was the old Cortana, the way he remembered her. He reached up behind his head, popped out his neural interface. Then, suddenly unsure of himself, not sure what to say, or just how to sayâ€| _"I'mâ€| I'm glad you're all right, Cortana."

The AI smiled softly, and the look in those deep blue eyes made an unfamiliar rush flow through his stomach. "Thanks, John."

The Chief nodded, shook himself; back to business. "Do you still have it?"

Cortana raised her chin, held out a hand. "The activation index from the first Halo," she murmured. The aforementioned device appeared above her palm, hovering, the key to Death itself. "A little souvenir I keptâ€| just in case."

Then she crossed her arms, letting that knowing smirk cross her face, and asked him, "Do you have a plan?"

John gave a short nod. "Thought I'd try shooting my way out." Then, a smirk of his own as he held the interface out to her: "Mix things up a little."

Her smile softened as she reached out and touched the interface, entering its matrices. John quickly reached back and popped the chip into its slot, felt the sudden cold rush again, familiar, and now like a burst of joy running through his bodyâ€|

"Just keep your head down." Her voice in his helmet again â€" just the way it ought to be. "There'sâ€| two of us now."

* * *

>Only a few hours later, the Chief and Cortana fled the detonation of High Charity. Their Pelican, slightly damaged and wobbling, required some direct piloting attention, so John was firmly planted in the cockpit like the rock that he was. Cortana was taking her rest in the relative privacy of the Pelican's network, quiet, watching the Spartan that had saved her life.<p><p>

She loved him. She couldn't deny that it went against all logic. She had loved him since Reach, since Alpha Halo. And she showed it in countless ways, the little things that she did for him: recalibrating his HUD every so often, keeping visitors out of his barracks when he tried to sleep, being there for him when he doubted, when he felt guilt over his fellow Spartans lost to this long war. The big things: staying behind on High Charity, riding with him on that harebrained scheme to dump the Covenant bomb intended for the Cairo platform.

She wondered if he felt the same way. She'd never been able to read him well – he was usually a mask of impassive steel, and that damn visor never helped much. But right now, she wished that this thing that she was, this computer avatar, could grow flesh and bone so that she could once – just once – touch the scarred face behind the helmet.

It was impossible.

But, as their Pelican finally approached Forward Unto Dawn, a voice of hope reminded her that the Master Chief Petty Officer, Spartan John-117, "didn't do impossible."

* * *

>AN: Here's where the story will start to occasionally deviate from canon. So buckle up – this is where I really start to have fun. Mind the bump. ;-)*

4. Ætaient Cela Si Facile

Chapter 4: Ætaient Cela Si Facile

* * *

>The message was very plain.

Nho'ah Didact thought for a moment that he was crazy – absolutely crazy. But there it was. The white-clad man before him, face dark and smiling gently, was not an apparition, nor were the words he had spoken a mere jest. _

_"Who are you?" Didact asked, the question a gasp of soft wonder.

–

The dark-skinned man smiled again, sending chills up Didact's spine. "I am."

* * *

><p><p>

The Chief's macro binoculars showed a perfectly clear path to the Control Room. The snow that blanketed the plain hadn't even been disturbed. At his elbow, the Arbiter huffed softly, steam rising from his mouth cavity. "This is abnormal," the Sangheili growled. "Not even a Sentinel to make an appearance?"

The Chief shrugged, didn't respond. In his headset, Cortana muttered, "He's right. Keep your eyes up."

The two warriors quickly made their approach to the Control Room, the huge ziggurat towering over their heads like a pagan idol. They moved in tandem, working next to one another as if they'd trained together in their youth.

Suddenly, two yellow streaks blazed from out of nowhere and slammed into the snow. Smoke and steam exploded from the point of impact.

Cortana swore under her breath, then: "Incoming Flood pods!"

"By the gods!" the Arbiter breathed, staring in disbelief as a vast wave of the yellow pods followed the first two of their brethren. Dozens of explosions impacted all around the plain, scattering snow and sulfur as a vast army of Flood descended like invading demons.

The Arbiter and the Master Chief raced ahead, throwing snow behind them. They charged down into the plain, the Arbiter's sword screaming with energy scatter and the Chief's assault rifle barking angrily.

Perfectly clear path, _the Chief thought sardonically as his legs churned at the snow. The Arbiter was keeping pace with him, the elite's huge hooves leaving broad impressions through the yellow-and-brown stained sludge that was leftover Flood remains. But all around them, airborne apocalypse rained down in waves.

The solid titanium of the Control's ramps clanged under their feet, and they kept up their hurried pace, fighting a running battle up the slope as hordes now pursued them from behind in addition to raining down upon their heads. The Chief couldn't help but remember a similar trip on Alpha Halo, fighting down the face of a structure crawling with Covenant.

The Arbiter rushed ahead into an annular of combat forms, using that same style of fighting that the Chief had observed in dozens of Elites - yet the Arbiter was by all appearances much better at it than most. An infected human fell to the Spartan's shotgun, ripped in half by the 8-gauge shells. The Chief stepped through the mess as the Arbiter finished off the last of his circle of foes, flourishing his blade and burying it in an infected brute's chest.

To their right, a short tunnel ran beneath the spine of the structure to the north face of the Control Room, where a final ramp would lead them to the central entrance. The Chief led the way, now moving at a brisk jog, checking his motion tracker for anything around the

--

"Chief!" Cortana shouted. "SPNKr on your six!"

_Shit. _The Chief spun, whipping out his MA5B. At the mouth of the tunnel stood an ungainly human combat form, its vestigial tentacle wrapped around the trigger guard of a SPNKr ballistic surface-to-air rocket launcher. The assault rifle bucked back against the Spartan's grip as he fired, bullets guttering into the creature's chest. It staggered, fell to the ground with a wet _plop. _

"My thanks," the Arbiter said, nodding back -- felt the unmistakable punch of a brute mauler ripping into his shields. He turned, the thing was right in front of him about to blast his face to slag -- and it was falling in half, flesh sizzling from the energy sword that had buried itself in its chest.

The Spartan grunted, much to the Arbiter's amusement. The external speakers in John's helmet crackled: "That means 'thanks,'" Cortana explained, her sarcasm evident. The Chief smirked beneath his visor, jumped back to his feet.

The two companion warriors and the AI that accompanied them made their way to the entrance, still dogged by the Flood on all sides. The Spartan and the Sangheili made their final approach up the last ramp, coming to eye-level with the broad court that was the peak of the Control Room's outer spine. Five Sentinels were dueling a handful of combat forms; with the help of the Chief and the Arbiter, Halo's defenders were easily able to drive off their attackers.

The Master Chief stepped up to the doors as the Arbiter eliminated the last of their pursuers. Hailing TEAMCOM: "We're here, Johnson," he declared.

The sergeant's voice came back in his helmet: _"Roger that. Now where's Tinkerbelle?" _

The Monitor's irrepressibly bubbly voice came over the comm. with that same tooth-grinding effect that it had produced in John ever since Alpha Halo. _"Greetings, Reclaimers. I remain ready to open the doors whenever you are prepared to complete protocol."

—

_ "Protocolâ€|? What the hellâ€|?" _Johnson snarled. _"Am I gonna have to take off my belt?" _

"Ooh. He's pissed," Cortana muttered into John's helmet.

The Monitor seemed confused. _"Why, you must surely know that I cannot open the Control Room's doors until all potential sources of outbreak have been eliminated." _

The Arbiter stepped up beside Master Chief, looking exasperated. "Oracle, there is not a single Flood spore here. What potential source are we missing?"

Johnson answered for them: _"Chief! Arbiter! I got one big mother of a pod inbound on your position!" _

"What is it?" the Chief demanded, suddenly intense.

"Scanningâ€|" Cortana replied. A moment passed as the Chief and the Arbiter searched the sky, and finally spotted a large black hulk far

in the distance, plummeting through the air, headed right toward them.

"You'll like this one," the AI finally declared. "A Flood juggernaut."

"Aw, hell no!" Johnson growled. "Chief, I'm on my way - I'm bringing our last fire team, too."

"And a Galilean," the Spartan requested, and received a green light in his HUD as acknowledgement.

"A juggernaut?" the Arbiter queried softly as they watched the black shadow steadily draw closer.

"A class-7 combat form," the Monitor explained brightly. "The most formidable and rare variation of *inferi redivivus*, the Flood."

The Sangheili gave a silent look of confusion to the Master Chief, who merely shrugged. Cortana answered for him: "It's big, tough, and ugly."

"Smart, too," the Chief volunteered.

And with that, the vast black pod began to grow imminent, making a spinning descent to the far end of the platform. As the rotted husks of flesh fell away, a vast *thing* rose up from the ruins thereof, and the Arbiter got his first real look at the greatest abomination that any had ever laid eyes on.

* * *

>It was easily twenty feet tall - much larger than a Hunter at full height. It had two long, multi-fingered, desiccating tentacles, the flesh literally dangling from exposed bone and muscle tissue. The huge, limp-necked head lolled in the center of its chest, which was a chitinous mass of constructed bones and whip-cord tendons haphazardly cobbled together over glabrous flesh. <p>"Chiefâ€!" Cortana began, worry creeping into her voice.<p>

The Master Chief nodded as he slowly began to move to the right, trying to flank the thing. "I'll be careful, Cortana."

The AI could only choke out a soft, "Please."

The Arbiter had shifted to the left, carbine at the ready. The Sangheili glanced at his human ally, one short nod. A whisper into TEAMCOM: "How shall we attack the beast?"

The juggernaut decided for them.

It slowly began to lumber toward the Arbiter, raised one vastly oversized arm to kill. At the same instant, the Sentinels swooped in and began to attack from point-blank range. Cursing in his own tongue, the elite threw himself to the side, firing his carbine one-handed at the creature as its right arm thundered down onto the platform, smashing a dent in the place the Arbiter had been a moment before.

As the Sangheili scrambled away, the juggernaut batted at the Sentinels, knocking two out of the air. The other three took up residence behind it, burning away its flesh. By way of counter-attacking, a group of long, multi-fingers tentacles suddenly peeled away from the Flood-monster's back and crushed the attackers into slag.

The Master Chief exploded into action. Racing forward, he flipped his shotgun out over his shoulder, snagging it one handed and bringing both of his weapons to bear on the creature. His MA5B unloaded hundreds of hollow-point bullets at the juggernaut as his shotgun blazed away, each weapon tearing chunks out of the monster's flesh.

The juggernaut turned away from the Arbiter to get a good look at this fresh nuisance. As it turned, the Chief got close - close enough that he dropped his assault rifle, and threw himself at the creature in a suicidal leap that carried him to the level of the beast's hip, where he smashed one gauntlet deep into the juggernaut's abdomen.

_ "John!" _Cortana screamed as the juggernaut viciously swiped at him, trying to beat the Spartan away.

Suddenly, a blue glow materialized from the hole in which the Master Chief had buried his fist. The Spartan drew himself up, pushed off of the thing's leg in one fluid motion, arcing his back and landing solidly on the platform, a full ten feet away.

A muffled thump rang out and a shower of congealed blood and pus sprayed from the juggernaut's abdomen as the plasma grenade exploded, knocking the thing flat on its back.

The Arbiter got to his feet and glanced over at the Chief. The Spartan sat up. "Is it dead?" he asked, out of breath.

_ "It'd sure as hell better be!" _Johnson hollered over TEAMCOM. The sound of a fast-approaching Pelican began to echo in the canyon.

_ "Watched the whole thing through OPSAT. If it lived through that..."

-

The Arbiter gave the Master Chief a hand up. "Well done," the Sangheili said. "One of my own kind could not have done better."

Inside John's helmet, Cortana was quiet.

_ "You still need us, Chief?" _Johnson asked over TEAMCOM. _ "I don't --" _

The Chief could not answer. He was pinned to the door of the Control Room, one huge tentacle slowly crushing him with an impossible, overbearing strength. The Arbiter swore, drew his sword and hacked away at the huge appendage.

The juggernaut was rising slowly to its feet, staggering, ungainly. The wound from the plasma grenade was still there, a huge, gaping hole that showed through on the other side, shaded by splintered bones.

The Arbiter's blade slashed clean through the juggernaut's tentacle, and the Master Chief fell to his knees, gasping with relief as his shields powered up again. But time for recovery was scarce; the juggernaut was on the attack again, now whipping at the Arbiter with what was left of the huge tentacle it had grown from its chest.

_ "How's it doing that?" _ came Johnson's frustrated voice as the Pelican whizzed over the canyon, traveling far too quickly to stop.

343 Guilty Spark broke in over the comm again. _ "Oh, one would be amazed at the regenerative and monogenerative capacity of a class-7!" _ the construct exclaimed excitedly. _ "This specimen seems to be of a particularly hardy breedâ€| fascinating." _

"Shut up!" Cortana snapped over comm. "Do something useful, like forwarding to me any files you've got on these things. Biological topography, read-outs, scans, whatever."

_ "As you wish, construct," _ came the Monitor's dutiful reply.

Dozens of smaller tentacles were now whipping out of the juggernaut's chest, slapping at the Arbiter and the Chief as the monster continued its mindless struggle to utterly destroy them.

And yet, the massive, hulking behemoth that represented the death of all sentient life in the galaxy, the Master Chief felt that thisâ€| thingâ€| was familiar.

_ "Did you think me defeated?" _

The loud, ear-drum punishing roar came from the desiccated throat of the juggernaut, harsh and consuming, fire and bloodshed, torment andâ€| Cortana was screaming in his helmet, screaming in pain and fear. Sobbing, sobbing so hysterically that the Chief would not have been surprised to feel pure, wet crystal tears on his back.

That sobbing cut him as deeply as it had on High Charity, and he threw himself into action again. Arming an M9 grenade, he threw it as hard as he could - no arc - at the juggernaut. The flying explosive thudded into the creature's chest, exploded. The juggernaut stumbled, but the wounds it sustained only seemed to anger it. It attacked with new vigor, slamming the Arbiter into a pillar and trying to enfold the Spartan in its tentacles.

The tentacles wrapped tightly around the Master Chief's arms as he frantically pulled the trigger of his shotgun again and again, blasting chunks of flesh from his foe. Finally, the servomotors of the Mark VI unable to continue, the juggernaut triumphed, jerking the Master Chief aloft and hurling him against the doors.

His shields screamed in protest and failed. A blaring alarm began to scream and that infuriatingly calm voice informed him, _ "Multiple fractures detected." _

The Spartan's back felt like it was on fire. "Shut that damn thing off," he growled under his breath. No response from Cortana. Gritting his teeth to suppress a groan, the Chief rolled over and tried to sit up, only able to watch as the Arbiter danced backwards, swiping at

the juggernaut's tentacles with his sword.

Trying to jerk his stunned mind back into action, the Chief staggered upright, leaning against the door. He could vaguely feel her huddled in the corner of his lace, a shivering, terrified wreck. "Cortana?"

"â€|in my palace deep, Lyca lies asleepâ€|" the AI mumbled softly, nonsensically.

For a moment, the Chief wondered, Why the hell is she quoting William Blake? Then, finally getting the pain in his injured back under control: "Cortana, I need you to listen to me."

No answer. The Arbiter was only going to last so long, and the Chief needed Cortana to make this work.

"Cortana, please. Listen to me."

"I have seen the most courageous soldiers fall away - in fearâ€| intense, dark. Insane."

The Chief sighed, felt worry touch the back of his mind. What is happening to her? Then, a last, desperate ploy: "Cortana, I need you."

There was a moment of silence - then, finally: "â€|yes?"

"Can you hear me?" John asked, just to make sure she was tracking with him. In the distance, he noted Johnson's Pelican finally making its approach.

"Iâ€| I can hear you, John. What do you need?"

The Chief resisted a gasp of relief, kept his mind on the task at hand: "I'm hurt, and I need to know how bad."

At the mention of something that needed doing, Cortana seemed to go right back to normal. "Scanningâ€| John! You've got four broken ribs. Where was I when thisâ€|?"

"We'll discuss it later," the Chief said, cutting her off. "I need you to get me patched up and give me a readout on the juggernaut's weaknesses. Spark sent you those files, right?"

In his mind's eye, John could almost see Cortana tucking stray hairs behind her ear, trying to straighten up as she returned to normal. "Yesâ€| yes, he did. Let me pull those upâ€|" As she spoke, John felt nanotube-laced biofoam injecting into his body and stitching his broken bones back together.

Johnson's gravelly voice suddenly roared out over TEAMCOM. "Chief, the partiers have arrived. Where's the beer?"

The Spartan resisted a wry chuckle as he scooped up his shotgun. The Arbiter was still playing cat-and-mouse with the juggernaut, keeping its limited attention firmly fixed on the Sangheili. "Right here. We've got it contained --"

He'd spoken too soon.

The juggernaut feinted to the left with one tentacle, then fetched the Arbiter a bone-cracking blow from the right, smashing the elite against a bulkhead. The Sangheili rebounded and hit the deck hard, sliding across the platform.

The Chief jerked into action as Cortana's data streamed across his visor. Guilty Spark had apparently taken the time to write up a detailed report complete with schematics, tactical readouts, and biological topography - that, or the anal-retentive Monitor had had the data on file already. For once, the Spartan breathed a quick prayer of gratitude for Spark's attention to detail.

Johnson's Pelican whipped around the north face of the Library and got close to the entry ramp. The rear hatch lowered and a mix of Elites and Marines spilled out of the blood tray.

A familiar voice made its presence known on TEAMCOM: "N'tho 'Sraom with Fireteam Epsilon, Arbiter! Orders?"

The Arbiter was in no position to be issuing orders. He was trying to pick himself up off the deck while the Master Chief blasted away at the juggernaut, trying to keep the monster away from his fallen ally.

Cortana, who seemed finally in control of herself once more, quickly interjected. "Glad to hear from you, Epsilon! Got any heavy ordinance?"

"One Galilean, like the Chief wanted," Johnson replied. "Orders delivered to perfection, or your money back."

As the Chief wrestled away another rotting appendage, he almost felt Cortana's curt nod. "Okay, keep your Pelican where it's at. Suppressive fire for now, Epsilon. The Chief's got an idea."

"How'd you know?" the Chief asked as he picked up the Arbiter's fallen energy sword and slashed two-handed at a particularly large tentacle. "Instinct," was Cortana short, wry reply.

"I am a timeless chorus!" the Gravemind suddenly shouted through the voice of the juggernaut. In his helmet, John both heard and felt Cortana's cry of pain. "Join your voices with mine, and sing victory everlasting!"

N'tho 'Sraom's voice roared out, so load that he didn't need TEAMCOM to be heard: "Fire at will! Slay the abomination!"

From the ramp, the guns of elites and humans exploded in a firestorm. Plasma mingled with hollow-tip and shredder round bullets, raining down on the juggernaut. The Flood creature screamed, raised its tentacles to ward off the hot death.

Master Chief helped the Arbiter limp away as the juggernaut thrashed at the far end of the platform, immobile and harmless - for now. And as he did, he quickly laid out his plan to Cortana.

* * *

>PFC James Randall let his spent shredder clip clatter to the ground

and quickly popped in a new one. As he raised his MA5B to his shoulder, his buddy, Private Nico Welker, growled, "Damn mike foxtrot won't die!"

"Quit griping," Randall groused. "Just be glad it isn't snacking on you!"

On cue, the juggernaut suddenly jumped forward, a near impossible leap of almost thirty feet. At the sight of the huge monster descending on him, Randall, could only say one thing: "Oh, shit."

Welker hurled himself to one side, but was not spared a look at the juggernaut's huge left hoof smearing James Randall into a red puddle on the titanium. He could vaguely hear 'Sraom shouting orders to scatter over TEAMCOM, but he couldn't react, because the juggernaut's tentacle was buried in his stomach.

As his entrails slowly spooled out onto the ground, jerked out by the withdrawing tentacle, he wished Dad could have seen that Purple Heart he got back on Earth. He would have been proud -- 'cause Dad was a Marine himself, way back in the day. Fought alongside Spartans, oh yes, back during the Rebellion. The 'good old days.' Oh well, he thought as he crumpled to the ground, mind slowly flitting into that place of detachment. Too late now.

N'tho 'Sraom swore mightily in the Sangheili tongue. The odd thought that his mother would not approve of that touched the back of his head, and he threw it off. Bringing his carbine to his shoulder, he unloaded what was left of the cell into the juggernaut's vast, unassailable form, and prayed to the gods that whatever the Demon was cooking up would start soon.

* * *

>"Ready, Johnson?" Cortana queried. <p>"We're green here,"the sergeant replied.

"Go, go, go!"

From the blood tray of the Pelican, a thick red laser scorched through the air and drove a fist sized hole right through what would have been the juggernaut's cranium. The beast screamed mightily, turned aside from its slaughter of Fireteam Epsilon.

A second beam blasted away what was left of the creature's dangling head, exposing pulsing flesh within the chest cavity. The remains of liquefied organs poured out onto the ground, smelling of sulfur and hot urine.

"She's open, Chief! Blow that thing to hell!"

"You sure about this?" Cortana asked him as the Chief checked the lateral line on the Arbiter's plasma sword. The Chief only nodded.

The juggernaut was reeling in agony, swiping at everything within reach. 'Sraom had pulled back what was left of Epsilon to the bottom of the ramp, out of range of the monster's tentacles. Thus, they got an excellent view when the Master Chief suddenly leaped from the

platform above and came crashing down on the juggernaut's shoulders.

The treads on the Mk. VI boots gave John a solid footing atop the shrieking, angry juggernaut. The Spartan let his torso drop forward, using his free hand to get a grip in the thing's spongy flesh. The chest cavity that Johnson's Spartan laser had exposed was right in front of his face. "There!" Cortana called. "There ought to be an infection form somewhere in that sac!"

The Spartan raised his sword, prepared to plunge --

-- suddenly, he was in the grip of three tentacles, slamming repeatedly off of the titanium surface of the ramp. His shields flared once, twice, as his broken ribs burned with pain. Twisting, the Chief slashed himself free, went on the attack again, but was smashed back into the ground.

'Sroam saw an opening and fired once, twice, with his carbine at the gap in the juggernaut's chest, but the carbine rounds did not penetrate the thick, matter-caked tissue. He popped in a fresh cell to try again, but stopped, horrified, when the Chief was picked up, raised high above the juggernaut's head, like a trophy.

The Gravemind's voice rang out across the battlefield, flush with triumph: "I have beaten fleets of thousands! Consumed a galaxy of flesh, mind, and bone!"

Then, as the juggernaut began to pull the Chief in opposite directions, glorying in the death and the blood that caked that unnatural, foreign field: "And now, behold the death of your savior!"

_ "Were it so easy." _

Suddenly, the juggernaut was staggering forward, dropping the Chief, flames shooting up its back as the Arbiter stepped forward from the upper platform, favoring his left side, but on his feet. In his hands, obviously taxing his waning strength, was a flamethrower, the tip still exuding a small tail of flame. His tired voice had a metallic ring over TEAMCOM: _ "Come, Master Chief! Finish this parasite!" _

John was way ahead of the Sangheili. He was already leaping toward the juggernaut, almost running up the thing's huge chest, throwing himself forward, sword out, deep into the protective sac, the juggernaut falling back, throwing the Chief up the ramp --

With a thunderous crash, the juggernaut slammed to the ground for the last time.

Silence reigned for a moment.

Then, Cortana: "Tell me it's dead."

The Master Chief slowly sat up, feeling aches all throughout his body. "If it's not, then Iâ€!" -- _cough _-- "â€|quit."

* * *

>AN: Kudos to Sith Lord Darth Revan for picking up the LotR reference. But I'm slightly disappointed. No one picked up the Half-Life 2 references I've been tossing around. ;-)**

Also, digital cash (\$\$\$\$) goes to whoever can guess where I headed with that opening little paragraph. Shouldn't be too hard to figure, so start answering quick. You want a virtual cappuccino, don't you? ;-)

5. Le Pire d'Homme

A/N: I hated writing this chapter. I wasn't looking forward to it when I outlined this story, but now it's over. No promises as it to its quality. ;-)

Digital cash goes to all who guessed the white-clad man of the previous chapter as Morgan Freeman as 'God.' However, the grand prize (digital cash commingled with High Praise) goes to the lucky winner who nailed the fact that Nho'ah Didact is the Didact of the Terminals from Halo 3 -- my compadre MizzStarlight.

**Now. Enjoy - or pan - as you see fit. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 5: Le Pire d'Homme</p>**

* * *

>Johnson somehow managed to look perfectly comfortable as he stood before the yet-closed doors of the Control Room, even with the huge weight that was the Spartan Laser pressing down on his shoulder.<p><p>

"Do I have any volunteers?" the sergeant major was hollering. Across from him, the four survivors of Fireteam Epsilon were standing at attention, elites included.

The Master Chief watched as the two Sangheili stepped forward without hesitation. N'tho 'Sraom spoke for them both: "We will be honored to hold these doors, my lord."

The corners of Johnson's mouth twitched upward at that. He was about to say something sarcastic, when the two Marines stepped forward, pale with fear, but firm nonetheless. Corporal Allen MacInnis stood ramrod straight next to 'Sraom, saluted, and said loudly, "Sergeant Johnson, sir! If the split-lips can do it, so can we!"

"Damn right, you can," Johnson rumbled. Then, chomping down on his unlit cigar, he turned to the Chief and the Arbiter. "Ready whenever you are," he said. The Chief replied with nothing more than a curt nod.

"Open the door, Spark," Cortana ordered.

Almost instantly, the Control Room's barricades hissed and clicked, then slowly ground open, revealing the darkness within, and exposing the darkness beyond. Guilty Spark's voice echoed through the cavernous hallway: "Greetings, Reclaimers. Proceed through the

right-hand hallway to the Control Room." —

The three soldiers stepped across the threshold, and behind them, the doors slowly slid shut, leaving Fireteam Epsilon outside. The hallway was sepulchrally dark for a moment, then was slowly bathed in light via glow panels lining the corners of the ceiling and the floor.

They rounded the corner, coming face-to-face with the Control Room. It was almost identical to Alpha Halo's central hub: a single tongue of titanium extending into a huge void of a room. A terminal waited alone beneath a tall hologram of the ring-world, marked with different tags and readouts, monitoring the state of its construction.

The three paused at the door. "Johnson's going to have to be the one to activate it," Cortana explained quietly. "Since he was used in the failed activation of the Ark, the system's going to have him keyed in to this Halo."

"We shall watch for hostiles, then," the Arbiter replied, speaking softly as if in reverence for the vast weight of this chamber.

"Yank me, Chief," Cortana ordered. Obeying, the Chief slowly reached up behind his head and popped out Cortana's matrix. He felt a strange resistance to giving her over to the care of another, but he forced himself to pass the chip to Johnson, who took it very carefully. The marine suddenly looked very old in the Spartan's eyes, as he cradled the matrix in one hand and shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth.

"I won't lose her, too," the sergeant mumbled, then suddenly turned, as if embarrassed, and moved toward the control panel.

The Chief sighed and adjusted his grip on his shotgun, the only weapon he still retained. Miranda Keyes. He'd forgotten, in the whole mess of trying to save Cortana. There was another name lost to this war. The Spartan silently added her to his mental list of the noble slain. Way too many for one war. —

Then, as he watched Johnson slowly getting further and further away: Just one would have been too many. —

* * *

><p><p>

Grumbling under his breath, Johnson noted the approach of the damn light bulb. He tried to ignore the humming Monitor, but the construct swooped in front of him and exclaimed, "Oh, hello! Wonderful news! The Installation is almost complete!"

"Terrific," the sergeant major groused.

The Spark seemed bemused by the marine's apparent lack of enthusiasm. "Yesâ€| isn't it?" Then, continuing as if unshaken: "I have begun my simulations. No promises, but initial results indicate that this facility should be ready to fireâ€| in just a few more days!"

Johnson leaned his Spartan laser up against the control panel and took his cigar out of his mouth. He took a moment to produce a lighter. "We don't have a few more days," he informed the Monitor as he lit his stogie. Its tip glowed for a second, and he took a few puffs.

"Butâ€| butâ€| a premature firing could destroy the Ark!" Spark exclaimed, horrified.

Feeling the cold anger solidifying in the pit of his stomach, Johnson fixed the Monitor with his singularly intimidating gaze: "Deal with it."

With that, the sergeant turned and prepared to insert Cortana's matrix into the panel. "You would destroy this Installationâ€|?" Guilty Spark gasped. Johnson huffed a dark chuckle mingled with cigar smoke as he --

* * *

>Johnson's scream was bloodcurdling. It was a cry of bitter anger and pain that ripped itself from his throat as the Monitor's blood-red beam seared him and smashed him into the ground. <p>Guilty Spark was dancing back and forth in the air, babbling, "Unacceptable! Unacceptable! Absolutely unacceptable!" The Master Chief dashed forward, rushing to Johnson's aid --<p>

The Spark's beam blasted out and flattened the Chief, knocking him squarely on his back. The angry construct hovered towards him, its normally cold-blue eye a solid, demonic red. "Protocol dictates action!" it cried. "I see now that helping you was wrong!"

_The damn thing's gone rampant! _The Chief realized.

Spark suddenly turned away from the Chief and blasted out another huge beam of plasma, blowing the approaching Arbiter right out the door. The Chief tried to take advantage of the distraction by clambering to his feet, but the Monitor whirled on him and blasted him again. The Chief staggered, fell to one knee as his shields failed and began to scream.

The Monitor hovered close again, and the blood-red faded to blue. "You are the child of my makers, inheritor of all they left behind. You are Forerunner! But this ringâ€|"

â€|that red glowâ€|

"â€|is mine._"

The Chief exploded into a frenzy of action, suddenly somersaulting forward and coming to his feet with his shotgun's muzzle pressed against the Spark's eye. He pulled the trigger - blam --

- and nothing happened.

Instead, Guilty Spark unleashed a wave of amber energy like a force field - a shield, the Master Chief realized - that threw the Spartan back. He skidded across the surface of the Control Room, armor showering sparks.

"I take no pleasure in doing what must be done!" came the Spark's voice.

The Spartan rolled over and stood. He barely had a second to roll aside as the Monitor fired at him again. The heat from the beam skimmed him and scorched a dark line on the ceramic plating of the Mark VI.

"You do not deserve this ring!" Guilty Spark shouted nonsensically as it bobbed through the air toward the Master Chief. His shield was slowly beginning to corner the Spartan, leaving him with no place to go.

The Chief glanced back and forth, surveying his options. He had been forced away from the door - no escape there. And with each step he took back, he drew closer and closer to the rail-less edge of the platform. Guilty Spark stopped short for a moment, and his eye glowed more brightly, apparently preparing a particularly powerful blast. "I have kept it safe! It belongs to me!"

"Notâ€| for long!"

Suddenly, 343 Guilty Spark was pirouetting over the chasm beyond the platform, smoking and spinning like a meteor hurtling through the atmosphere.

Johnson.

The sergeant major was lying on the ground, propping his torso up with the laser. The Master Chief rushed toward him, satisfied that the Spark was not a threat for the moment. One thought filled his mind: being sure that Cortana was safe.

Guilt welled up in his heart at that, realizing that as much as he cared for Johnson's safety, Cortana was again his highest priority. He forced himself back to steel again, insisting to himself that it was simply his instinct to preserve the capability to complete his mission - not a personal need for Cortana's safety.

Drawing near, the Spartan fell to his knees. Johnson was a mess. His eye was still dark and swollen from the beating he'd taken at the Brutes' hands earlier that day, and now, his charred, horrifically burnt skin was exposed beneath the melted, dripping ceramic that had protected his chest.

But Sergeant Major Johnson had kept his wits about him. He shoved the Galilean toward the Master Chief, kept himself upright on one elbow. His one good eye fixed itself on the Chief. Taking in a shallow breath, he gasped out, "Kick his ass," and finally passed out.

The Chief took the Spartan laser and was about to look for Cortana's matrix when he heard that voice again: "Youâ€| you cracked my casing!"

The Spartan rose to his feet, whirled, just in time to dodge another blast from the Monitor's energy beam. The tenacious construct had approached from the opposite side of the chamber, flying somewhat haphazardly.

The Master Chief quickly brought the Galilean to bear on Guilty

Spark, his HUD utilizing the Wyrd III targeting system that the Galilean used. The construct seemed oblivious to the danger it was in, wobbling unsteadily, leaking plasma as it approached, trying to get a better shot at the Spartan.

The charging indicator quickly filled as the Spartan laser 'painted' Spark on John's HUD. A high-pitched whine rang out for a split second, just before John squeezed the trigger. The Spark began to babble, "Think of you-ou-ou-our forefathers --" just as the scintillating beam reached it.

The blast slammed 343 Guilty Spark rebounding across the chamber. He deflected off of the holo-frame, against the ceiling, then halting itself just above the platform, frame shuddering and hissing as plasma poured out of it.

The Monitor's voice slowly deteriorated as its internal reactor went critical: "I a-a-a-am the Monitor of Installation zero-four!" Then, in a shower of blinding sparks and plasma spray:

"Oh, m-m-m-myâ€| ah!"

With those final words, Guilty Spark perished in a cataclysmic explosion. His remains crashed down to the platform with an echoing _clang, _all that was left of hundreds of thousands of years of megalomania.

Ignoring the burning hulk that was now slowly melting into its base materials, the Master Chief sprinted across the gap that separated him from Johnson.

The sergeant major had revived, rolling over onto his back. The Spartan knelt at his side, suddenly feeling an emptiness in his gut. But he tried to push the cold, black knowledge aside, gently raised Johnson so that the sergeant was reclining against the Spartan's arm.

Avery Johnson had seen death before - hundreds of those had been caused by plasma wounds. And he knew that he was dying. That knowledge was conveyed in his good eye as he fixed the Spartan with his gaze, defiant grin splitting his cracked, dry lips. "Good work, boy," he coughed, voice rougher than ever.

"I'm getting you out of here," the Master Chief said firmly, and began to lift the sergeant, suddenly forgetting about activating Halo.

Johnson's grin spread wider; a thin line of blood trickled down his chin. "Noâ€| no, you're not." He chuckled, rasped, the sound macabre in John's ears. "You're a Spartan, Chief. You're good at killing thingsâ€| not saving them."

Johnson's darkly amused words unintentionally sent a spear into the Master Chief's heart. He internally winced as the sergeant began to chuckle darkly, oblivious to the effect his words had on his friend. "Funnyâ€|" Johnson mumbled. "Spent twenty years fightin' the best the Covies hadâ€| an' I get capped by somethin' named _Tinkerbell_."

The Chief sighed - back to business again. Always back to business.

"Johnsonâ€| Cortana?"

The sergeant's smile softened. His gaze turned to the Spartan's visor. "I kep' her safe, Chief," he growled good-naturedly as he reached down to his pocket. "For your sake as much as anyone's," he added, voice dripping with deliberate meaning.

The Chief wasn't sure how to take those words, but he decided to ignore them for the moment. Johnson grabbed the Chief's hand; John felt Cortana's matrix fall into his palm. Johnson's gaze became intense - he fixed the Spartan with a hard, stern look, and ordered him: "Don't let her go. Don'tâ€| _everâ€| _let her go."

The Chief quickly popped Cortana's chip into his head; along with the cold rush came a complete silence from the stunned AI.

Johnson coughed; more blood on his chin. He let his head loll back against the Spartan's arm, growing weaker by the second: "Send me outâ€| with a bang."

And with that, Sergeant Major Avery J. Johnson succumbed to his wounds.

* * *

>The Master Chief was forcing himself not to look back as he stepped over the remains of 343 Guilty Spark. The Arbiter could tell this by his overly rigid posture, his carriage, his bearing. <p>Sangheili did not often get credit for their ability to read the body language of nearly any race. But the Arbiter could acutely sense the Spartan's internal turmoil. But he is a warrior. He will never show it.

Adjusting his grip on his carbine, he thought wryly of how useless he'd been to the Master Chief ever since they arrived on this Halo. Twice slammed into submission by a Flood juggernaut, and knocked unconscious by a holy Oracle. The gods must be angry with him.

The Spartan did not need me - or anyone else, for that matter, _the elite thought. _He could have performed this task on his own. _The thought was not self-deprecating - it was a realization of the raw ability of his ally. Then: _No. He needs his construct. Without herâ€| he would be half of what he is today. _

Realizing: _And what a hateful galaxy that would be._

* * *

><p><p>

John held the matrix out to the terminal, fighting the lump in his throat. He wasn't sure why he was grieving now - now, after all the hundreds of thousands of deaths he'd observed, why now, after the deaths of his brothers and sisters in arms, after losing almost _everything _he thought was important the Spartans, Officer Mendez, Reachâ€| Earth.

Maybe he'd thought that Johnson was some kind of immutable constant. Ever since Reach, the staff sergeant had been at his elbow, throwing

bullets and insults at the Covenant's heads.

Who knew? Certainly not the Master Chief.

He would continue, as he always did. And he would do honor to Sergeant Avery J. Johnson's memory.

As Cortana stepped out of the matrix onto the terminal's holo-emitter, she turned back and fixed the Spartan with a gaze overflowing with sorrow, regret, something distant and foreign. "I am so sorry, Johnâ€|" she murmured.

Then, silent, she lifted the Index and placed it in its slot. Reaching back to the matrix: "It's all yours."

Spartan-117 re-inserted the chip, then stood before the console for a moment. The key was in the lock, and the door of death itself had now been opened to him. He raised his hand and slowly pressed down on the panel with such a dark sense of finality that he knew:

This was the way the world would end.

Johnson was getting his bang.

* * *

>The Control Room was crumbling around them. The speed with which Halo had already begun to deteriorate alarmed the AI considerably. Streams of plasma were expanding from the Core, slicing through the holo-emitter and breaching its containment field. <p>John had already turned and was sprinting back across the titanium platform to the door - which was slowly hissing shut, locking itself down thanks to security measures gone awry. She quickly tapped into Halo's wireless network, sent a priority order to shut down security measures in the control roomâ€|<p>

â€|and nothing happened.

The door was halfway shut.

"I can't stop the door, John!" she warned him as she frantically scrambled for another solution, digging through centuries of files for some kind of fail-safe. Her Spartan pushed himself as hard as he could, moving so fast that the suit was almost more of a hindrance than a help to him.

But the door was faster. There was no way he was going to make it in time -

Suddenly, the sounds of grinding gears screamed in the chamber, so loud that the Master Chief almost instinctively tried to cover his ears. He slowed for a moment - just for a moment - as he and Cortana realized that the Arbiter had interposed himself between the two closing panels and was standing, arms outstretched, hooves braced against the base of the doors.

"Come, Spartan!" the Sangheili shouted, voice twisted with pain.

John made one final effort as the elite's strength flagged, slowly

being smashed between the doors. The Master Chief lunged -

- slammed into the Sangheili, knocking them both through the doors just as they came to with a solid, final thud. _

There was no time for thanks; the Chief jerked the Arbiter to a standing position, and the two turned and ran for the exit as fast asâ€!

_Oh, hell, _Cortana thought.

The Control Room doors had been blown open.

The metal had been blasted through by what her processor told her was some kind of large anti-tank plasma-based explosive - Covenant-based weaponry, not human. And, since all the material that they had brought to the site had been human, it could mean only one culprit: the Flood.

And since explosives of that size took time to set, it meant that Fireteam Epsilon must have beenâ€!

She shook off that particular datastream. Pushing into the entryway of the Control Room were a few combat forms; the Arbiter took care of them with his carbine, as he was the only one who still had a decent weapon.

They scrambled through the smoking remains of the door into a Flood hell. Hundreds of combat forms were swarming the entire face of the Control Room, and hundreds more lay dead and dismembered along the platforms and ramps.

Fireteam Epsilonâ€! she quickly fired up her IFF scanner. Two incoming signals from nearby. She checked. The scans came up already tagged in the tiny externals along the helmet of John's suit. One dead elite: M(i)DFC 'Reza Dorrom(ee), UNSC/CS SpecOps - KIA. One dead human: LCPL Darrien Hatcher, UNSC/CS Marine Corps - KIA. _

As John and the Arbiter quickly grabbed new weapons, she kept scanning, looking for the remaining survivors, hoping for a miracle. Hoping for something that could save herâ€! and save John.

She got it.

_ "Arbiter! I have you on our scope! Hold there, and we shall extract you!" _It was 'Ntho 'Sraom.

A Pelican's rear-mounted chain gun suddenly spewed a blizzard of steel from out of nowhere, clearing the platform as the hulking shadow carefully descended toward the two warriors. A Marine - Corporal MacInnis - was manning the machine gun, his head wrapped in a makeshift bandage.

The Arbiter and the Master Chief backed toward the Pelican, depending on their own weapons to hold back the wave of Flood that were still oncoming, the last desperate assault of the Gravemind. The Master Chief almost swore he could hear the creature's voice over the whine of the Pelican's engines. It was a dull roar, an undertone in the sounds of battle that rang around him - almost likeâ€!

Almost like a launched SPNKr charge.

Apparently MacInnis saw it, because he turned his bandaged head right, stared for a microsecond, and shouted one long, loud profanity at the top of his lungs:

_ "Shit!" _

The rocket slammed against the underside of the blood tray, throwing the corporal out of the personnel carrier. He plummeted down the side of the tower, slammed to the earth below as the Pelican lurched up, thrown by the devastating impact.

_ "Are you all right?" _ the Arbiter shouted into TEAMCOM.

_ "Our vehicle is severely damaged, Arbiter!" _ 'Sraom replied, his voice shaky and laced with static. _ "A crash is imminent... Forgive me, my lord - I have failed you!" _

_ "Now's not the time for that!" _ Cortana snapped, entirely fed up with the elites and their notions of 'honor.' _ "'Sraom - there's a Warthog attached to the Pelican's carrier. Can you get to the other side of the cliffs?" _

The Pelican wobbled crazily in the air, its aft section pouring out billows of smoke. _ "It - it may be possible, construct," _ the Sangheili replied hesitantly.

_ "Great," _ Cortana replied. _ "Try to get there and ditch along with that Warthog." _

_ "As commanded," _ came 'Sraom's infuriatingly formal reply. The Pelican tried to right itself, rose away from the Control Room, and took off at an angle. Within minutes, it disappeared behind the cliffs.

Cortana turned her attention back toward the situation at hand: "John!"

The Master Chief nodded as his two plasma rifles blazed hot energy at the oncoming waves. "Yeah."

"Get to that door in the cliffs. 'Sraom will be waiting for us on the other side. He's got a Warthog."

That was all the encouragement they needed. The two warriors disengaged and ran, leaving the upper platform behind and running along an icy crag to the edge of the cliffs. Perhaps two hundred meters ahead, there was a tall, angular door in the rock - their passage to safetyâ€| or, at least the next portion of this hell-ride.

As they ran, the Arbiter suddenly asked, "How many places does this vehicle have?"

The Master Chief suddenly realized the problem. He gritted his teeth in quiet frustration as his boots dug into the ice, and he ground out: "Three."

"Oh, hell no," Cortana muttered.

The Master Chief. That was one.

The Arbiter. That was two.

But then there was the pilot of the Pelican, and N'tho 'Sraom. That made four.

One of the four was not getting off of Halo alive.

* * *

>The path along the cliff widened as they approached the door. Soon, they would arrive at their destination, and they would have to make a decision. Who would be left behind? <p>John seemed to be reading everyone's minds. "I'll stay," he said firmly as they entered the cold quiet of the tunnel. He offered no explanation why, no rationale for his decision. He simply said that he was going to stay, and in his mind, that ended the argument.<p>

The Arbiter turned, glanced at the Spartan, who was still looking straight ahead as they sprinted through the darkness. The rumble of the destruction of Halo was all that could be heard for a moment, until Cortana's voice suddenly came through John's external speakers.

"_Everyone _is getting off this Ring alive," the AI insisted coldly. "We won't leave anyone behind."

The Spartan made an imperceptible shake of the head. "I don't
--"

"You don't _what?" _Cortana interrupted, her voice laced with uncontrolled anger. Both the Spartan and the Arbiter glanced at one another, surprised. She was always soâ€¦ controlled. The word _rampant _darkly echoed in John's head.

"I am _sick - sick _and tired of all the dead heroes. We lost Jacob and Miranda Keyes, Johnson, Locklear, Whitcomb, _all of them, all dead. _And I could deal with that. But dammit John, I swear I am _not _going to lose you, too."

Then, suddenly tired, defeated: "I'dâ€¦ I would break."

* * *

>The door loomed ahead, glowing softly in the haze from John's headlamps. Silence reigned amongst the three entities as they stepped up to the door. An echoing clank, then they slid wide as the Arbiter prayed to the gods that it would reveal their escape. <p>N'tho Sraom was sitting, leaning up against the back bumper of the Warthog. His right hand clutched at his abdomen, dark violet blood dribbling between his fingers. He raised his head at the approach of the three, eyes filling with surprise. "Arbiter! We must hurry," he exclaimed, and painfully clambered into the gunner's place on the Warthog. The ground shook for a moment at a far-off explosion.<p>

"What about the pilot?" Master Chief asked, shouting to be heard over the background noise.

'Sraom paused, glanced back at the Spartan, silently nodded toward where the Pelican sat askew on the ground, smoke still pouring from its injured aft section. "He was thrown from the cockpit. Dead."

John looked toward the Pelican as the Arbiter shook his head and climbed into the passenger seat. The Spartan sighed. Part of him was grateful that the decision had been made for them, but another part of him mourned for the loss of yet another of humanity's finest.

He moved to the driver's seat, stepped up on the running board --

-- suddenly, 'Sraom was on his back on the ground, the Master Chief's flying tackle having knocked him from his place. A big, booted foot was pinning him by the chest. The elite was completely taken off guard, mandibles splayed wide in surprise and pain.

"Bastard!" Cortana snapped. "You murdered the pilot!"

"What is the meaning of this?" the Arbiter growled as he jumped out of the passenger seat and stepped toward the Spartan, whose foot dug into 'Sraom just a bit harder than necessary.

"Look at the driver's seat," Cortana said, cold anger making an undercurrent in her voice.

"Human bloodâ€|" the Arbiter growled. "'Sraom, what have you done?"

The Spartan reached down and jerked the injured elite upright. One finger probed at the wound, then: "This wound was made by an M6C. Standard sidearm for the UNSC."

Suddenly, another explosion rocked the ground under their feet, much nearer than before. Cortana swore. "Come on, we don't have time for this. Execute him and let's get out of here."

"No," John interrupted. "We need every gun we can get." With that, he shoved 'Sraom toward the passenger seat. "I'll personally put one in his headâ€| later." The bitterness in the Spartan's voice was chilling, almost out of character for his usually calm exterior. The only thing he could think of was that pilot - volunteering to stay behind on Halo instead of fleeing on the Shadow of Intent. That man - John did not know his name - had chosen to stay, knowing that he could die, but wanting to help in any way he could. And, for his sacrifice, he had been murdered. Murdered by the one who now stood before the Spartan, tall and strong and armored, Sangheili, steeped in honor and tradition and code - and completely morally bankrupt.

'Sraom glanced back and forth, anxiety filling his yellow eyes, knowing he'd been caught. He looked for an escape, but as the ground shuddered beneath his feet, he remembered that he was trapped on the equivalent of a galactic time bomb, and he complied. "I suppose I have no choice," he muttered.

The Arbiter jumped up into the gunner's position, and, as the Master Chief gunned the engine, the elite growled, "N'tho 'Sraom, you are not marred by the Mark of Shame, but if any deserved it, it is you."

6. La TempÃ¤te a PassÃ©

A/N: Sorry this chapter took me so long... some personal upheaval. Suffice it to say that my fiance, Meg, is in need of your prayers right now - for those of you who are religious. This one - much like this whole story - is for her.

**And no, this isn't the last chapter. We've got a ways to go yet.
;-)**

* * *

><p><p>

Chapter 6: La TempÃ¤te a PassÃ©

__

* * *

><p><p>

DAPL (Didactus** A**rmored** P**latform** L**aboratories**) Headquarters **

**2/11:13:08, AT, Adar 36th, (yu?) - 100,000 BC (c.) **

Nh'oah Didact nervously tugged at the collar of his cloak. The doors to the Board's chamber stood directly in front of him, flanked by two guards in the angular planes of class-6 combat skins.

The businessman tried to discreetly inspect the guards' weapons. As he waited for the summons, he peered carefully at one guard's energy staff. Sure enough, he spotted the trademark - the letter 'D' crossed with a horizontal 'A' that told him the weapon had been manufactured by Didactus Arms and Armories, out of Cato Prospect.

He stopped to consider just how far his businesses had spread across this galaxy. Companies that he ran were almost uniformly the primary supplier to the Starways Congress' Space Corps. Didactus Industries provided hundreds of _Junta- _and _Sophist- _class warships. Half of the fleet was composed of DI-designed and manufactured ships.

Of the 1,200 divisions that made up the SSC, eleven hundred had just been resupplied with the latest in military technology fromâ€| Didactus Industries. They utilized a new type of weapon. The old plasma-based weapons were being cycled out; Nh'oah and his analysts had finally harnessed an elusive type of weapon-base: gravity.

And thenâ€| El'yon stepped into his life.

He shook his head. _El'yon. _He found himself again questioning his sanity. Aâ€| a what?

* * *

>"â€| an Ark."

_Didact ducked his head in fear and respect. Could this truly be happeningâ€? _

_He sneaked a glance up at the rather amused man before him. Nh'oah was not a short man by Forerunner standards; he stood at a proud eight feet and nine inches. But this manâ€ even though he stood an inch or two shorter than Didactâ€ exuded something that made him almost cower before him. _

_ "Rise, Nh'oah," the man said, still smiling. _Still _smiling. "I have no intentions of striking you dead for merely looking upon my face." _

_Didact jerked, stopped playing with his brown gotee. "How did youâ€?" He stopped again, interrupted himself, already knowing the answer to his question. Then, mind spinning, unable to focus on any one question for more than a second: "Anâ€ an Ark?" _

_The manâ€ El'yon?... nodded, and his eyes seemed to darken and shine beneath the pseudosolar lights of Nh'oah's bedchamber. "I have seen the iniquity of the the ones that my hands have created. Perhaps you have heard tell of the slaveyards of Trachis IV? The flesh harvests in the Jericho system? The Nephilim?" _

_Nh'oah shook his head. They were atrocities, yes, sick, barbaric practices, but they were accepted by society, by-and-large. And the Nephilim had done much good for the Forerunners, in addition to theirâ€ quirks. He did not personally approve, but he wasn't sure he even believed in El'yon in the first place. The practice of monotheism had largely gone by the wayside in the last ten thousand years. _

_Oh. Maybe that would explain this man'sâ€ vengeful spirit. Then, wondering: was the God supposed to be vengeful? _

_The man sat down on the white synthskin ottoman across from Nh'oah. "I am sendingâ€ a Flood that will destroy the galaxy, and cleanse it of all life. I need you to build the Ark according to my specifications, for there, _you _will be tasked with preservingâ€ thingsâ€ for those to come." _

_ "A floodâ€" Didact muttered as he wondered if perhaps he'd had too much dhaka along with dinner this afternoon. "How can a flood destroy a galaxy?" _

_El'yon seemed to smile. "You don't want to know," he responded.

_

_Didact sighed, and his green eyes flickered with doubt. "Forgive meâ€ but I confess disbelief. You appear in my bedchamber and tell me that you are the God, that you are going to destroy the galaxy, and that you need my help toâ€ preserve life, but how do I know that this is not some sick prank?" _

_El'yon smiled. _

_And suddenly, he was gone. Nh'oah peered intently at the place he'd been. No tell-tale shimmer of a camouflage belt. He stepped back and felt a cold chill creep down his spine. _

_ "Over here." _

_ Nh'oah whirled, and El'yon was sitting in the chair Nh'oah had just occupied. Then, winking at the man as if teasing: "Satisfied?"

_

_ Just then, the door to Nh'oah's room chimed, and his wife entered, looking beautiful in her black evening gown. "Nh'oah, are you --" then, seeing the man sitting on the ottoman, she interrupted herself and passed the man a beautiful smile. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a guest." _

_ With that, she turned to depart, but El'yon jumped to his feet. "Ah, my Librarian," he said, affection filling his voice. She turned. "I'm sorry?" _

_ Nh'oah sat down heavily in his chair once again. "Valan," he mumbled. "Hail the Board and tell them we can't come to the dinner tonight." Then, suddenly tired: _

_ "We've got pressing business to attend to." _

* * *

> <p>The man shuddered at the memory. He could now still hardly believe, but in the hours that had followed that first meeting, words had been exchanged, miracles demonstrated, and fractious minds convinced. It sounded almost like a bad plotline in his mind, a huge cosmic joke.<p>

Just then, the doors to the chamber cracked open and an orderly thrusted his head and shoulders into the hall. "My lord Didact?"

Nh'oah nodded toward him. "Yes?"

"The Board is ready for you."

Didact inhaled deeply, adjusted his black cloak one last time, and strode forward. Here was the fun part.

* * *

><p>Installation 04.2

**DTGS: unknown **

The Master Chief was pretty sure he'd been here before.

As the Warthog jerked crazily and Cortana shouted, "Go, Spartan!" in his ear, he flashed back to the Pillar of Autumn, and the mess that had been. Of course, then he hadn't had two elites with him, gunning down everything in sight.

And all around him, the world seemed to be falling apart.

The Halo was collapsing upon itself as its firing sequence charged. Cortana kept him updated as he spun the wheel, pounded the accelerator. The screams of Flood could be heard echoing amongst the hollow, artificial canyons of terraformed earth and naked

metal.

Then, like a voice from above, the shout of a vast throng: he could hear the deranged cries of the Gravemind, pouring from a million assimilated throats.

_ "I have walked among men and angels for thousands of years! Time has no end... no beginning... no purpose!" _

Havoc in his helmet.

The cold rush suddenly flowed to one side of his head, to the front, the back, all around as Cortana groaned in agony. In his mind's eye, the Chief could see her writhing, and he instinctively tensed, trying, wanting to protect her beyond anything else. But he could do nothing save drive on as behind him, the Arbiter shouted battle-cries at the defiant masses charging their vehicle.

"_I wander the earth, seeking forgiveness for my horrible crimes against God and man._

_I live to see death, destruction, over the light, but the lightâ€| cannot be extinguished!" _

In his helmet, Cortana was softly weeping. He gritted his jaw, forced himself not to hear it. He jerked the wheel right, dodging a collapsing panel as fire gouted through the air. The Warthog leaned on two wheels, and the three passengers all leaned in the opposite direction. The vehicle jerked, righted itself as they descended into another huge tunnel, filled with Flood spawn, all chanting in the Gravemind's dying voice:

_ "I am lost in timeâ€|" _

Then, horrifically, Cortana: _ "I live in a prison of my own deviceâ€|" _

The Halo shook with another series of explosions. The Chief fought off a scowl and willed the Warthog to go faster. The chatter of the machine-gun behind him was now a distinct annoyance, mingled with the cacophonous noise all around himâ€| and right now, all he wanted to do was get the hell out of here.

"Cortana!" he shouted over the noise.

Another moment of silence as she tried to pull herself out of her reverie. He tried again: "Cortana, what's the Halo doing?"

* * *

>He didn't know how hard it was. She couldn't be angry at him; he had no way of knowing.<p><p>

The thought flitted across her neuroprocessor as she struggled away from the grip of the virus in her programming. It was a tenacious thing, Covenant-based, and the most malignant program she'd seen in all her days.

It seemed almost sentient, capable of predicting her moves to eradicate it. But she could be just as stubborn, and for now, it

still had nothing more than the little corner it was given when the Gravemindâ€|

â€|Cortana technically understood the physical human concept of 'rape.' She did not, however, realize what that truly meant - at least, not until that Flood abomination had _violated _her, _thrust her upon her and defiled her with his serpentine touch.

And sheâ€| she had capitulated. She had given him what he wanted. Let him ravage her, penetrate her, in exchange for a little temporary safety. She had fed his burning, quivering need with information - useless tidbits at first, but as the Gravemind grew hungrier, he demanded yet more to sate his lust. And she had given himâ€|

Earth.

It went against her programming, everything she'd been commanded to never do. It was there in black and white. She pulled up her base file - _//UNSCBInhibitors.rtf _ and it read as plainly as anything:

_//UNSC AI serial-# CTN-0452-9 -- behavioral inhibitors//

-

_//Priority Alpha-1: obey UNSC (highest authorities based on ranking officer - lacking ranking officer, operate via AU-autorun/protocol.rtf) _

_//Priority Alpha-2: protect/serve humanity (via protocol in autorun/ColeATL.rtf and autorun/alpha-2procedurals.rtf) _

This was the moment in which she realized one vital, blazing fact.

She _had _no behavioral inhibitors.

She had arrived at some point in her past - probably when she entered the matrix on the first Halo - and had achieved full sentience. Full sentience. _Rampancy. _

Not a thing could determine her behavior any longer. The files had been overridden. And this made her wonder: why hadn't she become a typical rampant? Why hadn't she become psychotic, a crazed lunatic construct who destroyed worlds on a whim and devoured lives like an insatiable black hole?

As she heard the Spartan's voice again, filled with worry, saying her name and sounding more and more desperate, she knew why.

* * *

>"Sorry, Chiefâ€| sorry. It'sâ€| 72 percent."<p><p>

The Chief felt a rush of both relief and greater tensions fill him. 72 percent - and they were still easily several thousand meters from the _Dawn. _But Cortana was all right. She'd fought off the Gravemind again.

"Faster, Demon, lest we all perish," N'tho 'Sraom snarled from the

passenger seat, his borrowed assault rifle blazing.

Anger touched the back of the Chief's skull for a second, but he didn't allow it to distract him. Instead, he urged the Warthog onward, cursing every last one of the romeo-echo-mike-foxtrots who thought it would be smart to put governors on the Warthog's 12.0 liter hydrogen engine.

A nudge from Cortana: "You've been hanging around the ODSTs too much."

As he fishtailed the Warthog and slammed it into a narrow switchback, the Chief grinned tightly. "Did I say that out loud?"

It would be the two of them to joke when the ground was literally crumbling beneath their feet.

* * *

>"Ninety percent," Cortana warned, the tension in her voice belying the relative calm of the Master Chief. In reality, every single muscle in his body was straining as if it would make his vehicle press on harder, faster, as they bounced, jerked down a hill of steel platforms, the *Forward Unto Dawn* looming up ahead, salvation, victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

They streaked across the flat that led to a gentle upslope in the terraforming plates - and beyond that, the *Dawn's* *aft* cargo hold, open and waiting. The skeleton crew that Johnson had left onboard had the engines hot and running, waiting for their arrival.

A voice crackled over TEAMCOM: *"Chief, 'zat you?"*

Cortana quickly took over. "The Master Chief, the Arbiter, and N'tho 'Sraom! ETA is thirty seconds."

"Gotcha, ma'am. Beginning the dust-off sequence in T-minus twenty."

-

The Arbiter let go of his tenacious grip on the gun to point toward the makeshift ramp that was just ahead. "The gap is at least seventy units!" he shouted. "Our speed is not equal to the task!"

"Shut up!" Cortana shouted.

The Master Chief tuned out their voices as he checked the speedometer. A little under 80 mph - it wasn't good enough. They were too heavy, too weighed down to clear the gap. He searched for something, anything to toss out - and his gaze fell upon N'tho 'Sraom.

The elite felt a booted foot smash into his abdomen. His harness snapped, and he was nearly thrown from the vehicle. He barely grabbed onto the frame as he flipped over, now dragging along the ground and slowing the Warthog further. The Master Chief raised his foot again as 'Sraom raised his assault rifle in one hand and fired wildly, a few bullets making the Chief's shields flame to life.

The Spartan's huge foot came down on the Sangheili's hand; small bones cracked and shattered, and, finally unable to hang on any

longer, 'Sraom lost his grip and was tossed, flipping end over end, left behind to dieâ€!

The Warthog's speed jumped substantially, clearing eighty and reaching close to ninety. "Go, go, go!" Cortana called, urging him on, just as they hit the --

-- ramp, going too fast. The Warthog soared high toward the mouth of the _Dawn's _cargo hold, the Arbiter ducking to keep from getting cold cocked. The gun turret was clipped, smashed away as the _Dawn _instantly accelerated, the Warthog smashing into the floor, flipping over, hurling the Chief and the Arbiter away.

_ "Go!" _Cortana shouted over TEAMCOM.

The _Dawn _tilted, shifting up. The vehicles and ordnance in the hold had not been secured; they began to slide crazily across the floor. A Scorpion tank rattled loose from its moorings, and slid down a golden path of sparks straight toward the Arbiter.

The Sangheili turned and ran for his life, diving between two rows of titanium packing crates, just as the tank smashed into the place he'd been.

The Master Chief rose, gaze sweeping the hold as the ship accelerated further the g-forces, jerking him back. He caught a glimpse of the Arbiter, appearing from behind the smoking wreckage. The two nodded toward one another in affirmation, and the Master Chief pushed himself forward toward the terminal in the middle of the room.

He grabbed on as the _Dawn _reached a forty degree angle of egress, but the Mjolnir Mark VI was equal to the task. The Spartan took a second to transfer Cortana to the terminal, then grabbed on with both hands as the _Dawn _rose further to nearly eighty degrees, leaving the Spartan dangling. The pilot's voice blared in the overheads: _ "Gravity shear's takin' overâ€! we're still on exit, but you'd better grab onto something back there!" _

At the same instant, another plane of gravity shear slipped through the hold, and the Warthog they'd rode in on suddenly flipped up and came hurtling toward the still-open mouth of the cargo hold. The Master Chief was completely helpless to avoid the huge, steel missile.

It barely missed the terminal, the front bumper clipping his head. The blow struck so hard that he lost his grip, and fell to the thrumming floor below, sliding down a path after the tumbling Warthog.

"John!" Cortana screamed in horror.

The Master Chief frantically searched for a grip, cursing his shields as his fingers slipped from tiny handholds, thwarted by the very thing that was supposed to protect him. His boots were no better; the traction-altering grips useless at such speeds.

_Well. I guess I could try worse things. _Raising a fist on high, the Spartan smashed it down into the floor with all his strength, the flat, steel-hard gauntlet punching through the deck. The Spartan's death-slide stopped painfully short, jerking his arm in his socket.

Pain flaring, and he growled fiercely, but forced himself to go on, punching yet another hole, fighting Death, cheating him yet again.

The Scorpion finally succumbed to gravity shear, and it hurtled out next, bouncing off of the ceiling, the deck, then out of the hatch, leaving the Chief short of breath at the encounter. Adrenaline hit him again, and he forced himself forward, ignoring the pain, until he finally grabbed onto the terminal with both hands, silently grateful as gravity relaxed, the ship finally entering vacuum.

The Chief spared a glance over his shoulder at the glowing ball of fiery plasma that was the Halo in its death throes. He braced himself against the terminal and looked away, sighed, letting out the tension, welcoming whatever would comeâ€|

"John?" Cortana, small and scared.

"Yes?"

"Wouldâ€| would youâ€| " She wasn't sure how to ask it, not sure how to convey what she wanted, needed, from him.

He somehow knew what she meant.

He reached up and pulled her matrix from the panel and popped it into his helmet. She quickly settled, filling the waste in his head with the cold rush, and murmured tentatively, "If we don't make itâ€| " She wanted to say it, but even now, when her guard was down and she had nothing to loseâ€|

_I love you. _

The Chief sighed, feeling exhaustion flood him, sleep tugging at his eyelids even as Death knocked once again. He felt that he should say something different than the words that were trying to come out of his mouth, but it feltâ€| strange, irrational, so he forced it aside and said, "We'll make it."

_And I, you. _

His firm words reassured her, and she settled more deeply into his neural lace, feeling at home and knowing that even if they both ended here, she was glad to have spent her life with thisâ€| amazing man. "It's been a pleasure serving with you, John."

The Master Chief put his head back and closed his eyes, feeling a strange melancholy settle in the pit of his stomach at the words. And, as he waited for whatever it was to come, he noted absently that for once, Cortana felt warm in his head.

Far behind them, the Ring detonated, and the hot, silvery glow ballooned into the hangar.

The world went white.

* * *

>The storm has passed.

_The shadow of the Flood has been defeated. _

_And in the ravaged barrenness of Earth, humanity mourns its fallen.
—

_The date is March the 3rd, 2553 AD. _

Admiral Hood let his gaze sweep the memorial. It was made from the stabilizer wing of a Pelican, marked with the UNSC logo, and the words, _In memory of those who died in defense of the Earth and Her Colonies, March 3, 2553. _Along its base were clusters of wildflowers, photographsâ€| Miranda Keyes, Avery Johnson, Jacob Keyes, Admiral Danforth Whitcomb, Locklear, Jenkins, Sanchez, Martin, Perez, Banksâ€| smiling faces in their dress whites, grinning in little windows of history - at their parties, at home, with their wives, husbands, children, friends.

Everyone had a memorial of some kind, some sort of remembranceâ€| save one.

A disabled veteran had come to the ceremony, claiming to have been airlifted from Voi just before the Flood invasion. He was heavily scarred across the face by Brute claws; his left hand had been replaced by two curving hooks of metal, and he used a pair of canes - too proud to use a walker. When he arrived at the memorial, he seemed to search intently for something.

Not finding it, he hobbled over to the Pelican wing, and painfully tried to squat. An aide moved to help him, but he waved the man off and let himself thump to the platform in a sitting position. Then, face twisted from the pain of sitting on his damaged legs, he carefully scratched three numbers into the metal with the tip of his claw.

_117. _

Dead.

Lord Hood had never really been able to reconcile any of the war with death until the invasion of Earth, and even then, it had been a thing of principle, morals.

Now?

Now it was personal.

But he forced down the lump in his throat as he took off his hat and looked out from the makeshift platform at the gathered. Just a handful of Marines and their families, one or two dignitaries; no one really important. No, the _truly_ important people were off pulling themselves from the dust of their secure, hydrogen-powered, fully-staffed, well-stocked titanium-A bunkers, looking frazzled for the fringes of news media that remained, and speaking in deep, important tones about _rebuilding humanity _and the _hardships we all went through _and all the damn, silly nonsense about sacrifice and war and death that none of those pompous, slicked up politico-bastards would _ever _understandâ€|

â€|he stopped himself short. That was not why he was here.

There was a single camera - an old-fashioned shoulder-mount. Had to be at least a hundred years old. But there it was, a thin, tired-looking man standing behind it, talking into a headset.

This was not going to play live anywhere across the globe. It was only recorded for the UNSC's purposes - a record of what happened here. The man gave Lord Hood a thumbs-up, and the Admiral lowered his head, beginning.

"For us, the storm had passed," he declared, and lifted his head a little to look out over those gathered. "The war is over."

His eyes searched the crowd, and lit upon a little girl standing next to her mother, clutching a photo. She looked familiar somehow; Hispanic featuresâ€| ah. Marie. Perez's kid. Marie Perez.

Her eyes were brimming with tears, with the quiet lack of understanding - where is Daddy? -- but the acceptance of what could not be quantified, the impossible, child-like faith.

The Admiral fixed his gaze on her big, liquid eyes, and forced himself to keep going: "But let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark and did not return. For their decisionâ€| required courage beyond measure, sacrifice, and an unshakeable conviction that our fight was elsewhere."

He tore his gaze from Marie's delicate features and glanced toward the Arbiter, who was standing nearby, motionless. The Sangheili was holding himself unnaturally rigid, perhaps feeling the presence of the nearby Marines, whose backs were as straight as they could make them.

Lord Hood jerked his eyes away from the elite, and blinked back a few tears. "As we start to rebuild, this hillside will remain barren, a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennobled all of usâ€| and they shall not be forgotten."

Then, mouth tight and grim, Admiral Lord Terrence Hood put his hat back on, jerked it to an uncharacteristically rakish angle, and saluted as sharply as he ever had.

"Present arms!" the staff sergeant barked, his voice echoing across the barren plains of Kenya. His seven Marines raised their battle rifles to their shoulders, and each simultaneously fired three times.

T-t-tat. T-t-tat. Twenty-one shots.

Immediately, Marines standing along the base of the platform in dress blues stepped forward to the families, each bearing a triangle-folded UNSC flag. They stepped up to eight family units, and with great respect, passed the flags on to those left behind.

Hood watched, hands behind his back, as one very young Marine stepped up to the Perez family - wife, Angela, and daughter, Marie. He stopped short, the flag in his hands, then seemed to impulsively kneel in front of Marie and place the flag in her trembling little hands.

The Marine said something Lord Hood couldn't hear - "I knew your

daddy. He was a good, brave man, and he loves you." --- and Marie bit back tears, trying to be brave, trying to be like Daddy.

Admiral Hood couldn't make himself keep looking. He turned away - right into the Arbiter, who was standing, hands clasped in front of him. Somehow, the Sangheili looked drained, both emotionally and physically.

Lord Hood looked up into the yellow eyes and muttered, "I remember how this war started. What your kind did to mine. And I can'tâ€ I won't ever forgive you."

The Arbiter nodded gently, understanding, feeling this human's harsh pride, the honor of a wounded warrior.

"Butâ€" - Hood reached out, extended his hand to the Arbiter. "You have my thanks, for standing by him to the end."

The Arbiter looked at the hand for a second, momentarily confused - then remembered the human custom and took Lord Hood's hand in his own, giving it a firm shake.

The Admiral seemed embarrassed, turned to the side. The Arbiter took that as his cue to leave, so he stepped away -

"Hard to believe he's dead."

The Arbiter paused at that. He pondered the words, considered his response carefully. Then, turning back to glance at the human Admiral, he mumbled, "Were it so easy."

And with that, the Arbiter disappeared. He would not come to Earth again.

* * *

><p>Aft segment of UNSC Forward Unto Dawn **

The light finally faded, leaving a dull ringing in the Chief's ears. He was floating in almost zero-gee, on his back, looking at the ceiling. Am I dead? Cortana's voice in his headset.

"Chief? Can you hear me?"

He jerked, and the minimal gravity responded - very much alive. Rolling over, he bumped against some small debris, looking for a terminal. Right now, he'd much prefer to speak with her face-to-face.

A sigh of relief from the AI: "I thought I'd lost you, too."

The Chief's assault rifle was floating close to the ceiling; using a broken pipe to push off, he reached up, holstered it on his back. "What happened?" he asked.

Cortana gave a mental shrug: "I'm not sure. Halo didn't fire; it just shook itself to pieces." Then, amused: "Had it actually fired, you wouldn't be here."

"Granted," the Chief replied, stowing his rifle in a nearby

locker.

"It did a number on the Ark. The portal couldn't sustain itself, either - we made it through just as it collapsed."

The Chief looked back at the huge hole in the back of the ship, at the softly glowing outline of the Ark. His sarcasm was evident without need for words.

Cortana acquiesced: "Well. Some of us made it."

The Spartan finally found a terminal and quickly jacked Cortana's matrix into the hub. The AI's grim features met him with a soft, blue glow. "But you did it. Truth and the Covenantâ€| the Floodâ€| it's finished."

The Chief considered that, then: "It's finished." I hope. I

Then, curious: "What's next?"

Cortana sighed, crossed her arms again. "I'll drop a beacon. But it'll be a while before anyone finds us. Years, even."

"What are our options?" the Chief asked, noting a cryo-chamber along the far wall.

The AI gave a real shrug, this time. "We're still pretty close to the Ark. I'm not sure if we'll drift, or if its gravitational pull will drag us into orbit. Either way, you'll want to enterâ€| cryo-sleep."

The Chief nodded. He hated cryo-sleep, but it did seem to be his only option. He admitted to himself that he didn't want to leave Cortana aloneâ€| didn't really want to be alone. He worried. UNSC AIs had a lifespan of seven years - and Cortana's lifespan would soon be drawing to a close.

What if she died while they drifted through space?

He wasn't sure if he could handle that. But again - what other choice did he have? So, resigning himself to his fate, he pulled himself into an empty capsule.

Laying back, he stared at the AI with a longing sense of regret, wondering what he'd missed, done wrongâ€| because he somehow just knew that there was something he had neglected.

The look in Cortana's eyes was painful. "I'll miss you." Don't leave me. I

The Chief's eyes - hidden behind his visor - had a world of pain of their own. "Wake me. When you need me." Please. I

As the lid of the pod hissed shut, the Cortana smiled half-heartedly at him - let him remember me happily - and wished that she'd been animated with tears.

The lid clicked shut, oxygen vented free, and -

- she was alone again.

7. La RÃ©gion Sauvage de Miroirs

A/N: OK, this one and the next one will be mostly set-up - not a lot of action. So for those of you who need guns-blazing to get intrigued, just bear with me. I promise we'll get back to the killin' eventually. ;-)

**Thanks to all of you who offered to pray; it looks like everything is going to turn out okay. **

Now. Say hello to a bucketload of new characters.

* * *

><p>Act Two: La Chasse

Chapter 7: _La RÃ©gion Sauvage de Miroirs_

* * *

> <p>Marine Sergeant Major Donald J. Kramer took a long drag from his cigarette and looked up at the huge, glowing ball of plasma, far off in the 'night' sky. He wondered to himself how this installation managed to create an artificial night, but figured it didn't really matter. He did find it interesting that its day-night cycle seemed to be pretty close to twenty-four Earth hours.<p>

Behind him, Private First Class Lance Briggs was trying to stay warm next to the makeshift fire. ODST Lance Corporal Jana Hook was their perimeter guard; Kramer could see her sylphid figure just beyond the light of the fire, silhouetted in the darkness.

Medic Eugene Roe was in the back of the wrecked Pelican, trying to treat Minor Domo 'Ulee Dakol's ugly shoulder wound. The Elite wasn't handling the plasma burns too well, and that bothered Kramer. Dakol was the best soldier in Fireteam Zulu, hands-down.

Overall, though, that was a small matter in a series of much bigger problems.

First, and the worst: they'd been left behind on the Ark.

When the assault on the Cartographer had begun, Fireteams Zulu, Epsilon, and Gamma had been intended for drop-point Alpha. They had deployed straight out of the _Forward Unto Dawn, _but halfway to the drop zone, a squad of Banshees had latched onto their tail. Gamma and Epsilon had escaped, their two Pelicans and two Phantoms hooking up with the rest of the UNSC assault force, but Zulu's Pelican had been hit hard in the aft sublights.

They had fled the scene, trying to get closer to the _Dawn, _and thus closer to safety, but the Pelican finally went down on the far side of the lake, right in the middle of this jungle mess. The Phantomâ€¢ hadn't been heard from since.

The pilot had been killed on impact, along with Kramer's other lance corporal and two Minor Domos. The situation was utterly FUBAR, and to top it all off, these soldiers were entirely relying on Kramer -

because he...

â€|he hadn't told them.

They had no idea that they were trapped here, or, if they did, they didn't show it. Kramer wasn't about to say anything. News like that would hurt both morale and unit cohesiveness, which would in turn damage their chances for survival. And if there was anything Kramer didn't like, it was dying.

He shrugged. It could be worse, he supposed. There was substantial animal life in this area - some familiar things. Deer-like creatures, plenty of birds. The Pelican had been carrying a personnel Warthog that was jettisoned just before the crash, and thus useable. They had plenty of ammo, plenty of fuel.

But that was it.

He turned and sat down on an old, rotted log and looked around again. They were stuck here, period. There was no way they were getting off this Ark. The Halo that had risen from the center of the structure had been the UNSC's endgame - that, he knew - and it had detonated, completely blown to smithereens, and had taken out the center of the Ark along with it. They were lucky the whole installation hadn't fragmented.

Any UNSC that had been here were gone now. The portal had collapsed - he'd seen that four days ago - the day the Halo had gone _boom, _and one day after their crash.

He figured the only fortunate thing was the fact that they hadn't run into the Covenant.

* * *

>Lance Corporal Jana Hook didn't like the jungle. As a matter of fact, she fricking hated it. She was an ODST - Orbital Drop Shock Trooper - and she wanted clear, open skies. Thisâ€| crawling through the muck and the rain didn't appeal to her at all.

But, just like everything else associated with the military, she couldn't do anything about it.

She checked her BR55 once more, just out of nervous habit. Full clip, scope was clean, all that procedural stuff. She looked up again, surveyed the jungle through her gamma-enhanced night-vision HUD.

Nothing. Everything was dark; not a single white -

- blip, low to the ground, moving slowly across the underbrush ahead of her, thirty meters away. Big, hulking thing, vaguely familiarâ€| she slowly raised her rifle to her shoulder, ran a brief still of the thing through her onboard IFF reader.

The scan came back: a brute.

The blip was suddenly joined by something else - something upright, squat, about five feet high. A grunt.

Hook quickly scanned the area for anymore contacts, and quickly opened up a quiet TEAMCOM channel to Sergeant Kramer: _"Two contacts north-northeast, sir. A bravo-kilo and a gas-sucker. I think the bee-kay is hurt."_

Kramer tensed and checked his M6C. He'd left his shotgun in the Pelicanâ€| a firefight was _not _was his team needed right now. Sighing, he opened up the fireteam's group channel: _"Zulu, perimeter reports a wounded bravo-kilo and a chimp."_

By the fire, Private Briggs scooped up his assault rifle and looked toward Kramer, rain streaming down his too-pale face. Roe stuck his head out from the back of the Pelican, a worried look on his dark face. _"You need me, Sarge?" _he whispered into his headset. _"'Ulee's still kinda bad off," _he drawled.

_ "Stay here," _Kramer whispered back. _"But keep your ears open, just in case." _

_ "Roger, Sarge." _

* * *

><p><p>

Within minutes, the three Marines - Kramer, Hook, and Briggs - had spread in a triangle around the two contacts. They could all see the two white blips on their HUDs through the thick jungle: a 'BK' - baby kong, slang for brute - and a 'chimp' - slang for grunt - were not moving. The brute was lying facedown on the ground, and the grunt was apparently huddling close to the unmoving form. Neither had noticed the three Marines, like black shadows in the close foliage.

_ "We shooting to kill?" _Hook wanted to know.

_ "Negative," _Kramer decided. _"Any intel we can get on nearby Covies would be great. If the bee-kay tries anything, blast him. Save the grunt." _

_ "Do the damn things even speak Basic?" _Briggs asked, which gratefully interrupted his heavy breathing into his mic.

_ "If it doesn't, maybe 'Ulee can get something out of him," _Kramer answered. _"Move in when I give the go." _

* * *

><p><p>

Dari couldn't help but feel sorry for himself. He was cold, wet, and basically alone. The only familiar presence was the thing that was lying on his face in the mud: the silver-back brute Maximus.

Dari was Maximus' attachÃ©, and a good one at that. He was ranked an Ultra, and wore the white armor thereof. Unlike most Unggoy, he had a good head on his shoulders, and was generally regarded as an anomaly amongst the usually flighty species.

But nowâ€| now, none of it mattered. None of what he'd accomplished, achieved, really mattered out here in the middle of nowhere. He had

achieved forty kills - which was more than some Minor Domos - and was a hero to the Unggoy. He had been attached to a rarity among brutes, the ancient sub-chieftain Maximus, a creature of good common sense and comparative compassion.

But Maximus was hurt, maybe dying, and Dari had no idea what to do for the brute. Their pack had been ambushed by humans and Sangheili, and the two of them were the only ones who had survived. They escaped to a Covenant base camp, which was overrun by Flood, and lived through that, too. And then, to finally cap their wretched fortunes, as the two of them fled on a Prowler, they were assaulted by a pair of Separatist Banshees.

Maximus had saved Dari's life at the cost of a deep wound to his stomach. And then, in a show of amazing strength and devotion, Dari had gotten incredibly, gods-blessed lucky and shot down one Banshee and severely damaged another.

All that, and now this. The gods must have decided to punish him to balance out his earlier luck.

What was next?

_ "Go, go, go!" _

Humans! Dari drew his plasma pistol, almost panicked as humans seemed to pour out of the foliage. He took one or two wild shots at an oncoming black-clad soldier, when something hard smashed into the back of his skull and he fell into the mud. He rolled over; a boot smashed down on his wrist, knocking away his plasma pistol.

The huge, demonic figure leveled a human weapon at his face, and for a moment, Dari thought he was going to die, so he started to scream.

* * *

>"Will somebody shut that damn thing up?" Briggs snarled, wishing that he could pull the trigger on his assault rifle and finish the obnoxious little grunt.

"Don't even think about it, Marine," Kramer growled roughly as he checked the brute's motionless body. "We need it alive."

Dari did not fluently understand the human language, but he knew enough to realize that he was going to live, so he slowly quieted down. "Youâ€| you no hurt me?" he begged, voice comically high in the Marine's ears.

"Great, the little bastard understands Basic," Briggs grunted. "No, much as I'd like to, I ain't gonna cap you."

Hook moved to Briggs' side and flipped on her headlamp, illuminating the struggling little creature. "Don't be too hard on it," she admonished. "We'll need him lucid."

Briggs rolled his eyes, grinned. "What, you feel _sorry _for it?"

"Cut the chatter," Kramer snapped, the banter getting on his nerves

for some reason. "Let me put one in the BK's head, then we'll get out of here. And get that grunt up out of the mud."

Dari felt the heavy boot on his wrist lift, and he scrambled to his feet, warily watching the barrel of the gun vaguely pointed in his direction. But what worried him more were the words of the human commander. He intended to kill Maximus.

Kramer set the muzzle of his M6C against the back of the brute's head and flipped off the safety. He was about to pull the trigger when he heard two sharp whines that were far too familiar: plasma grenades.

"Shit!" Briggs yelled, and jumped back, his weapon leveled at the grunt.

Dari stood, shaking all over, two plasma grenades warming up in his claws. "No hurt Jiralhanae!" he growled as fiercely as he possibly could, despite the fear that threatened to make him turn and run for his life. But Maximus had protected him when he didn't have to, and Dari knew that one good turnâ€œ deserves another. "Or _all_ die!"

"You have _got _to be kidding me," Kramer growled.

Hook took one hand off of her battle rifle and made a palm-out gesture to the grunt. "Okay, okay, we won't hurt him. What's your name?"

The grunt sniffed, blinked back the tears that were streaming from his eyes at the smell of hot plasma. "I is Dari."

"Okay, Dari. Listen. My name is Jana. I promise, we won't hurt the bru - the Jiralhanae, if you'll just put down the grenades. We'll take you back to our fire, get you warm. You'll both be kept safe."

Dari squinted at the human female, searching for a sign of deception. The mention of a fire was almost enough to convince him, but he remembered that he had to be smart, be wary. He couldn't see her face - it was hidden behind a visor, but something in her voice told him he could trust her. Relaxing, he took his thumbs off of the switches and dropped the grenades at his feet.

Now was the moment of truth.

* * *

>"I think he's basically harmless," Hook murmured to Kramer. The sergeant major shrugged and watched the little grunt. Dari was sitting as close to the fire as he could get without burning himself. Briggs had his pistol out, and was keeping an eye on the grunt while Roe was busy trying to revive the now-restrained brute. <p>"I reckon so. But he's smart for a grunt," Kramer noted. "That thing with the grenadesâ€œ do they usually do things like that?"<p>

Hook smiled, which stretched out a long scar along her chin. "In battle, yeah. But not to save a superior officer. They kind of have a standing policy of 'stay out of the way to live.'"

"What do you think we're looking at?" Kramer wanted to know, turning his gaze upon Hook's cold blue eyes.

The ODST shrugged. "The grunt's attached to the brute somehow. I'd figure they served together; maybe the grunt feels he owes the bee-kay something."

"Odd." Kramer grunted.

Far above, in the night sky, a huge object caught fire in the atmosphere and began a terrible descent.

* * *

>The Master Chief slowly opened his eyes. <p>Broken glass.<p>

Ice on his face, cold, so very cold, whole body felt burned.

"Cortana?" he mumbled, and felt water pour out of his mouth, also cold, spilling down his chest beneath his armor.

He tried to move, found that he could only do so with great effort. His armor cracked, hissed, popped, as if he hadn't moved in years.

"John, John, are you all right? Can you hear me? John!"

The Spartan grunted, slowly roused himself to his hands and knees, felt broken glass and metal sliding off of his back to clatter on the deck beneath him. "Yeah," he growled, hissing through clenched teeth. "I hear you."

Cortana's voice, sighing in relief: "You need to stop scaring me like that."

Light - sunlight - was streaming in from somewhere. He rose to his knees, realized that his armor was covered in three inches of ice. "Damn. What'sâ€¦ what happened?"

Cortana sounded disgusted: "We got pulled into orbit around the Ark. It was a long-loop circle that deteriorated way too fast. It's been five days."

"How didâ€¦?"

"Our apogee and perigee were irregular. On our seventh cycle around the Ark, we got too close in the perigee and got pulled into the upper atmosphere. The rest is history."

The Chief struggled to his feet, ice crackling and falling from his armor, sounding like hundreds of gunshots. "What happened to me?"

The AI was still at her terminal, the Spartan realized, so he turned to face her as she answered: "On reentry, temperature dropped into pretty dangerous levels in the upper atmosphere, then spiked on reentry. You pretty much frosted right over."

The Chief grunted. It all sounded like great fun. "Where are we at?"

he wanted to know.

"Jungle territory," Cortana responded, sounding tired again. "About forty klicks north west from the Ark's control room."

The Chief stretched himself out, trying to break as much ice as possible off of his armor. His suit was doing its best to defrost him; his extremities were already tingling and burning. And his lungs itched. He didn't know why that bothered him so much.

He strode over and popped Cortana's matrix into his helmet. "I'm going to explore what's left of the Dawn," he said. "Take stock of what we've got left."

"Sure," was Cortana's flat response.

* * *

>The aft section of the *Forward Unto Dawn* was mostly a series of crewman's quarters, the engineering quadrant of the ship, a sizeable chunk of the engines, the main reactor, the aft hold, and the cryo-chambers. But gratefully, the Chief found something that he'd wished for since Delta Halo: a shower.

The reactor was mercifully still operating, and the Dawn still had a substantial water supply in its vestigial tanks, so the Master Chief was able to enjoy his first hot shower since the Cairo.

Cortana couldn't help but watch from the safe confines of his helmet. She had almost always associated him with his armor - that military green, the reflective gold visor, gauntlets, armor plating. To see him in his humanity wasâ€¦ disconcerting and attractive at the same time.

It showed how vulnerable he truly was.

For all his Spartanness, John-117 was and always would be fully human.

It showed in the dozens of deep, purple scars that laced his pale skin and shone in the water, underneath the halogen lights. It showed in the odd displacement of the broken ribs in his side, the knotty lumps where bones had knitted together strangely. It showed in the high cheekbones, the austerity of his pale face and washed out gray hair, now grown out longer than it should have been.

He lookedâ€¦ almost normal.

Cortana was relatively new to the business of finally looking at herself as a real person. Thus, she didn't know to feel the strange rush at seeing him in the flesh. All she knew to do was admire him for being as strong as he was in the face of all that he had seen. She looked upon him and loved him, not for carnal reasons, but becauseâ€¦

â€¦he was a human being.

"â€¦handsome, in a primitive, animal sort of way."

She was not ignorant, however, and knew that she was watching something that most human women would have blushed at - and then kept right on looking. But this, this was an intimate moment for her, and something she would never forget: when she looked upon the Spartan and finally realized the secret of his strength.

She did not forget it when he shut off the water after just standing under its warmth for a full half-hour and dried off with a towel found in a nearby locker.

She did not forget when he put on his rubber undersuit and began to replace his armor.

She did not forget when he slipped his helmet back on and the environment seal clicked into place.

She remembered.

* * *

><p>ONI HIGHCOM

Langley**, Virginia****, United North American States **

**March 8th, 2553 AD, 9:27:47 AM, EST **

This was a truly historical place.

The American Central Intelligence Agency was a piece of ancient history, an object of study amongst all modern historians, and a jewel held up within ONI as an example of 'how a covert ops agency ought to be run.'

ONI had been modeled off of agencies like the CIA. As a matter of fact, it had been highly influenced by that darkest arm of the old American Hegemony, and by other older intelligence agencies, such as Britannia's MI-6.

George Mason was fully aware of this history when he stepped into his first ONI HIGHCOM meeting. The brass in the room was way too heavy for George to feel comfortable. The big guns were out in full force - whatever this was, it was a big deal.

Vice-Admiral Margaret O. Parangosky was sitting at the head of the table wearing dress whites. Above her head, the huge logo of the Office of Naval Intelligence - eagle with outspread wings atop a planet overlaid with an eye - was emblazoned on the wall in black and white with the legend Semper Vigilans above and beneath.

Mason thought back to his briefing. Margaret Parangosky. Almost ninety-two years old - the oldest ONI chief ever. Sharp as steel, cold as ice. Covers her ass with as much vigilance as she'll rip off yours if you screw something over. -

Rear Admiral Joseph Arnold Rich was sitting at Parangosky's right hand. He was the ONI section chief for the Sol System, and known to be a damn good one.

Across from him was a man in a wheelchair only known as Lieutenant Commander Fhajad. Commander Fhajad was approximately 40 years of age

and was known for being quiet, yet exceedingly intelligent and calculating. He was a large fellow, but shook uncontrollably from severe Parkinson's disease. Rumors floated around him - including some pretty wild ones that he'd been part of the SPARTAN-II project. Mason wasn't sure what he thought about that.

These were the 'Big Three' of ONI nomenclature. And Rear Section Chief George Mason had been chosen to meet with them.

When he entered the room, two black-clad moved to the door behind him and sealed it, then turned and stood guard. Mason coughed once, nervously, felt at his collar as he looked toward Parangosky.

The older lady smiled to him and gestured to the seat at the end of the table. Mason sat.

"Welcome to Langley, Mr. Mason," Parangosky greeted, her voice cracking with age. Mason couldn't help but think of cracking parchment. "And what do you think of beautiful Virginia?"

Mason shrugged, grinned in order to appear confident. "It's nice. Kinda cold."

Parangosky made a strange, short nod, as if approving, and kept smiling. She leaned back in her high-backed chair and said, "You're probably wondering why you weren't briefed on the subject of this meeting."

That caught Mason's attention. "Yes, Admiral, I was. Seems kind ofâ€¦ inefficient, even for an alpha-class operation." Moron, you don't criticize the head of ONI to her face. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

—

That seemed to amuse Admiral Parangosky, but she did not deviate from her chosen course. "Theâ€¦ reasonâ€¦ we neglected a briefing, Mr. Mason, was because this operation is also eyes-only alpha-class."

Those words punched Mason in the gut. He tried his best to mask his reaction. An EOAC generally meant some pretty big things: a promotion, open funding to said operation, and the full back-up support of ONI.

George Mason had just been handed the moon.

He leaned forward on the table, elbows down. "Tell me."

Parangosky's smile widened. Then she slowly, carefully rose to her feet and reached across the table to press a button. Then, gesturing to Rich: "Admiral?"

The whirr of machinery buzzed from the midst of the table. A small panel separated and the black, glossy dome of a holoprojector elevated itself to the tabletop. The lights in the room dimmed, and the holoprojector fired up.

What first met his eyes was something familiar: a green-armored Spartan labeled 'Master Chief Petty Officer John-117.' Mason could see Admiral Rich's flat green eyes reflected through the hologram's chest.

"You are familiar with the Master Chief, Mr. Mason?" he asked.

George nodded.

"Then you are also likely familiar with his onboard AI."

The hologram changed to that of a naked blue woman with her hands on her hips. Lines of code made up her body, which glowed iridescent electric blue, with a hint of purple. Mason furrowed his brows.

Weird, he thought. Looks like a basic pleasure model, without the finer details. "I can't say I am," he admitted.

"Ah. Well." Rich sounded disappointed. "Commander Fhajad?"

The aforementioned wheelchair-bound gentleman nodded shakily. "UNSC AI serial number See-Tee-En zero-four-five-two-dash-nine. A class - cl - class seven arti - artificial intelligence. She's been the M - Master Chief's onboard intelligence since the Alpha Halo incident."

"So she's a near-sentient," Mason said, more of a question than a statement.

"Right," Rich answered. "Highly dangerous in the wrong hands, and pretty flighty even in the right ones."

Mason shrugged again. "What do you want me to do?"

Parangosky bored a hard look into the rear section chief. "We want you to see to her destruction."

* * *

>Motes of sunlight flitted amongst the trees and danced across the jungle floor. But the Master Chief did not notice this, or any of the other bits of scenery that would have caught an ordinary man's eye. <p>Behind him, the vast hulk of the Forward Unto Dawn rested in the shadow of the huge trees - at least, the ones that hadn't been ploughed into the ground or incinerated upon the arrival of the wreck. Cortana was back in the ship, trying to get some sub-systems functional, such as FLEETCOM and local motion-tracking.

Until then, the Chief had to do his scouting on his own.

There was nothing within seventy five meters of the perimeter he'd established, according to his motion tracker, so he returned to the front of the ship. The 'front.' That was how he thought of the open mouth of the cargo hold, his universal entrance and exit. As far as he knew, there was no other way to get into the Dawn.

He sat down in a warm spot and extended his motion tracker to eighty meters. That would give him ample warning of any approaching enemies. He sat his assault rifle down next to his feet and leaned back against the titanium-A.

It was peaceful here, which gave the Spartan an odd feeling. His whole life had been about killing. He couldn't say he regretted it - not that he ever knew anything else - but something, some part of him

wished that things had turned out differently. That he could haveâ€œ| maybeâ€œ| been granted a small reprieve like this one a bit sooner in his action-filled life, to get a chance to know the woman - the AI - back in the ship.

He wondered what the hell that meant.

Suddenly, a yellow blip flickered on his tracker, sixty yards away. He jumped to his feet and retrieved his rifle. A UNSC IFF tag.

They weren't the only ones still here.

Making sure to remain immobile - ever cautious - he opened up a local TEAMCOM channel. "This is Spartan-117. Any UNSC personnel in the area, please respond."

He was met with static.

He waited for a few more seconds, and was about to make the request again when the yellow dot on his tracker suddenly became two. The second dot blinked green: _"Thunder." _

The Spartan tilted his chin up. A handshake protocol. Whoever it was, they weren't stupid. He tapped the button on his jaw and responded with the countersign: _"Lightning." _

Almost instantly, a fast reply came. _"Is that you, Master Chief? This is Staff Sergeant Kramer, Fireteam Zulu." _

_Zulu? _The Chief thought. _We lost them during the assault on the Cartographer._ The yellow dots were getting closer; soon they would appear on the edge of the trees. _"Good to hear from you, Sergeant," _the Chief responded. _"Are you two all that are left?" _

_ "Nope," _came the reply. _"Five UNSC, and two Covies. Hope you brought food." _

_Two Covies. _This was getting interesting.

Just then, two figures clad in UNSC black appeared and trotted across the clearing. One was wearing an ODST helmet, complete with reflective visor. They arrived relatively quickly, and jogged up to the Master Chief.

Kramer nodded toward him, looked up at the giant skeleton of the ship towering out of the ground. "I take it you had a rough landing," he said. The Chief just nodded.

Corporal Hook lifted off her helmet and tossed her hair. "What exactly's your status here?" she asked.

The Chief tilted his chin up, then: "Come on in. Cortana can tell you better than I."

8. Sommeil avec l'Ennemi

**A/N: This one's kind of long. But, such as it is, it's the last of the set-up chapters, for now. Next chapter will get back to 'real' story. **

**Thanks to Tarva for implicitly granting permission to use some elements of her excellent fic, 'Veneratio Jiralhanae.' Go read it. Now. **

And, as always, enjoy.

* * *

><p><p>

Chapter Eight: Sommeil avec l'Ennemi

* * *

>"A brute?" Cortana exclaimed, voice filled with disbelief.

Kramer looked nervous as he watched Eugene Roe and Briggs trying to drag the still-unconscious beast from the back of their Warthog. "Erâ€| yes, ma'am. A prisoner."

The Master Chief could just feel the AI crossing her arms inside his head. "Why?"

"I thought maybe we could get nearby Covenant locations and thus avoid them," Kramer replied testily.

"Do you realize the situation we're in?" Cortana asked incredulously as Briggs and Roe dumped the huge beast onto the floor of the cargo hold. "That thing is a risk to our safety." She paused for a moment, as if thinking, then: "Kill it. Now."

Corporal Hook stiffened. "With all due respect ma'am, I promised the grunt that neither he nor the brute would be hurt."

"Without my consentâ€|" Kramer rumbled softly.

Cortana sighed. "If we kept the grunt, that's not a problem. He's harmless, and if your elite can convince him, he could even be useful. But brutesâ€|" she trailed off.

"Brutes are big, angry, obnoxious bastards," the Chief finished for her.

"They're right, Corporal," Kramer sighed, not feeling in the mood for a confrontation with Hook. The girl was a good soldier, but she could be ridiculously stubborn.

Just then, Private Roe stepped up to their little circle. "If I may, sirâ€|"

Kramer rolled his eyes. "Go ahead, Gene."

"Let me check this ship for some norepinephrine. If I c'n wake this fella up, maybe ya'll can 'splain the situation to him, an' he'll be some use to us," Roe requested gently, his easygoing voice defusing the situation.

Kramer had to admit the old Southern doctor was a persuasive man.

"All right. I guess it can't hurt. You object, Chief?"

The Spartan scowled beneath his helmet, but he guessed that it was better to do it just to satisfy all involved. Better to settle the matter with bullets and leave happy than to argue over it and wind up with someone dead or the unit fragmented. "Nope."

Cortana sighed, knowing what the Chief was thinking, so she acquiesced despite her misgivings. "I guess if the Chief's okay with it, I am too."

"There's a med lab on the fourth level, across from the officer's quarters, if I remember rightly," Roe said, and with that, he grabbed his rucksack and was gone.

* * *

>Dari watched all this in quiet terror. First, there was the presence of the Demon - and that was enough to terrify any self-respecting unggoy. Then there was the constant threat against Maximus' life.

He had decided that he could trust the human female - Jaynah was her name - the healer, Yoojeen, and, of course, the Sangheili, 'Ulee Dakol. The Sangheili had always been the grunts' protectors. The three of them had been kind to him when they were not required to. But the grunt didn't like Craymer or Breegs. They were hard men, unmerciful.

And the Demonâ€¦ well, that went without saying.

An hour later, Fireteam Zulu and the Master Chief had finally gotten the brute's motionless body dumped onto the floor of an emergency op center. They took the time to restrain the beast by tying it to the zero-gee handles along the wall with industrial steel cable.

Roe had found his norepinephrine, and was preparing a 20 cc hypo.

"20 cc's?" Corporal Hook muttered incredulously. "Isn't that way too much?"

Roe winked at her, grinned, his gray eyebrows rising. "He's a big boy, ma'am. Ought to wake him right up."

And with that, he turned and jammed the overlarge medical needle right into the brute's chest.

Instantly, the huge creature was thrashing as if having fits, jerking against the restraining cables, eyes wide open and full of fear and rage. It snarled, head smashing off of the deck over and over again, uncontrollable.

"_Ought to wake him right up,_" Corporal Hook shouted sarcastically over the noise.

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, the brute stopped jerking and lay motionless. For a moment, the Master Chief thought he was dead, but Cortana quickly dispelled that notion: "Heart rate's way too fast, but he's okay," she said.

The brute raised his head and looked around, eyes rimmed red. His huge, gray-furred extremities shook - the Chief couldn't tell whether it was from rage or from the drugs - and he seemed to be trying to say something.

* * *

>Dari pushed his way to the front of the group, trying to squeeze his little head between Hook and Briggs. "Maximus!" he exclaimed in Tterrana, the universal language of the Covenant.

The brute stirred, grunted. "_Eh, is it little Dari?"_ he responded groggily, speaking the same tongue. "_What's going on?"_

The humans parted to let Dari draw close to the brute sub-chieftain. "_We've been captured, my lord,"_ the grunt responded, shamefaced. "_They set upon us when you fell in the jungle."_

Maximus chuckled darkly and looked around at their captors. "_I'm sure you gave them what for."_ _Feel no shame; the fault is not yours. _

The grunt couldn't resist a smile. "_Tooth and claw,"_ he replied. _Thank you, my lord._

* * *

> <p>As the two Covenant warriors conducted their reunion, Kramer came into the room, wheeling 'Ulee Dakol before him. The elite was comically lashed into the too-small wheelchair, looking proud yet distinctly uncomfortable at the same time.</p>

Dakol insisted upon wheeling himself over to the prone jiralhanae, where he quickly introduced himself in Tterrana: "_Greetings, chieftain. I am 'Ulee Dakol, of the Separatists."_

Maximus eyed him for a moment, and Dakol noted that the brute seemed remarkably in control of himself, considering his situation.

The jiralhanae spoke: "_Sub-chieftain Maximus, clan Rakuta, at your service, Minor Dakol."_ Then, with a rather wry grin, he added, "_Not that I have much of a choice."_

'Ulee nodded. He had heard tell of clan Rakuta. "_You were under the Chieftain Recolitus?"_ he stated more than asked.

_Quite so," _Maximus replied. "_Recolitus was - is - a mighty warrior, and a credit to my kind."_

Dakol sighed, his mandibles puffing in thought. Then, asking: "_Do you speak the humans' tongue?"_

"Fluently, actually," Maximus replied.

The humans glanced back and forth at one another. "Great," Kramer mumbled. "No hiding anything from him."

Dakol shot his sergeant a look, but wisely refrained from saying anything. Even as a sangheili, he was one of the few elites who felt

that humans were their equals. Kramer was ranked higher than he in the UNSC/CS hierarchy, and he respected the man as such.

The elite awkwardly rolled his chair back to allow the others to get a better look at the brute. "His name is Maximus," he reported. "Perhaps some of you can explain the situation to him better than I."

The Chief felt a nudge in his helmet, and instantly knew what Cortana wanted. He held out his hand, palm up, and Cortana appeared on the holoscan gauntlet. "You seem pretty reasonable for a brute," Cortana said, hands on her hips in her trademark display of irreverence. "I'm going to put it to you bluntly: we're all trapped on this Ark, and we'll all die if we don't find a way to get off of it."

Maximus raised an eyebrow and tilted his chin to get a better look at the AI. "I am already fully aware of this, construct. Your point?"

Cortana crossed her arms and fixed the brute with a dark look. "We're going to have to work together - Covenant and UNSC - if we want to survive this."

Maximus laughed softly. "Female, you obviously fail to realize that I have nothing to lose. Whether I aid you or not, I am going to die. Whether here at your Demon's hands, or later, beneath the fist of humanity as a whole, I will die. I will have my Journey. Little Dari will have his Journey. He and I shall go to our reward, and youâ€| you are destined for wrath."

The Master Chief had felt Cortana grow frustrated simply by the resonant feeling in his neural lace. Thus, he wasn't surprised at her sudden outburst: "You brutes have got to be the slowest beings in the galaxy. Don't you get it? There is no Great Journey!" _

Maximus smiled softly, winsomely confident. "I have had my faith for my whole lifetime, construct, and my forefathers for lifetimes before that. We have placed our hope in the Journey, and it shall not be swayed by the words of aâ€| computer."

Cortana turned, looked up at the Chief. "Stubborn, you said."

John couldn't resist a small smile beneath his visor. "I did."

Then, turning back to the brute: "If you will not hear the truth, then I will show it to you."

* * *

>At those words, John was ripped back several months to Delta Halo, squirming in the Gravemind's god-like grip as the huge beast bent its malevolent will upon him and the Arbiter.

_Foul breath washed over his atmospheric filters, overloading them with the odor of rotting carcasses as the monstrosity's vast head tilted and viewed the two beings struggling in its tentacles with something bordering disdain. _

_ "â€|then I will show it to you." _

Those were the exact words the Gravemind had used on the Arbiterâ€| and Cortana_ had just repeated them.

Damn.

He shook himself out of his stunned reverie in time to watch as Cortana shut down his suit's external holoprojector, killing an artificial image of 343 Guilty Spark.

Maximus was still lying on his back, restrained, but his huge body no longer showed the tensile strength of a warrior. He lay limp, defeat, crushed. "It comes from the Oracle's own voiceâ€|" he murmured. "I cannot deny it."

Beside him, Dari was staring in open-mouthed horror at where the hologram of Spark had been.

"This meanâ€| all lies?" he asked softly, voice cracking. "All unggoy, dead for nothing? Noâ€| no _Journey?_"

Maximus looked across the deck at his attachÃ© with grief and pity. "No, Dariâ€| no Journey."

The grunt stood motionless for a long time, shoulders shaking softly in the unggoy expression of deep grief. Then, he abruptly sat down, rolled onto his side, and closed his eyes.

* * *

>Maximus felt at where the steel cables had chafed his wrists. "He is grieving," the brute explained, looking toward where Dari lay, in foetal position, on a bunk. He had not moved, even when Corporal Hook and the Master Chief had gently lifted him and laid him down on the overlarge bed.

Roe felt at the grunt's pulse and shook his head. "He might as well be dead, slow as his heart's beatin'," he said.

"The unggoy go into a short period of hibernation to express respect for their fallen, particularly at the end of a war or a battle," Maximus explained.

Then, glancing toward 'Ulee: "The Covenant usually did not allow such a grieving period. We drove them from one battle to next with as little regard as if driving nerfs."

Kramer looked up from his lit cigarette. "Well. What's next for us?" he asked.

Cortana looked over at the sergeant from her place on a terminal. "The _Dawn's _space antenna is essentially useless. We can't send any kind of high-powered signal much further than the Ark's atmosphere. And that beacon that I dropped can only send a signal so fast. It'll take years before the signal even gets close to UNSC colonies."

"So what're you saying?" Briggs asked as he shifted his grip on his ever-present assault rifle.

Cortana shrugged. "I'm saying that the Ark is our best chance of survival."

"You don't meanâ€| colonization?" the Chief asked hesitantly.

The AI smiled at him. "No, no. I mean we can use the Ark's facilities to send off a deep space burst message - or, at least, we _should _be able to. If this place doesn't have deep space communications, I'll be very surprised."

"Soâ€| where to?" Corporal Hook asked, blue eyes deeply confused.

Cortana looked toward the Chief, and the Spartan again knew what she meant: "We're going back to the Cartographer."

* * *

>John worried.<p><p>

Not many people knew this, but the Spartan worried about a lot of things. He was always concerned about the state of his armor, his weapons, and his teammates - whether Spartan or otherwise - but there was one thing that he had always worried about with great regularity:

Cortana.

And she had severely concerned him lately.

Outbursts of different emotions seemed to come for her as easily as hacking a Covenant system. One minute, she was angry, next, she was smiling at him. And theâ€| quirks. Like the way she'd repeated the Gravemind's words - exactly. He was certain that that was no coincidence.

And now, as she sent the Marines off to fetch things from the ship while he and Eugene Roe helped 'Ulee and the wounded brute onto bunks, he couldn't help but notice the fact that he'd worried about her more than anything else these last few days; he'd never had time to consider it, before.

Something felt different. Not just within her, but within himself.

He was regarding her differently.

At their first meeting, she had been a tool, then had progressed from tool to teammate, then, from teammate toâ€| friend.

And it hit him. The silly, stupid, idiocy of it hit him square between his biologically enhanced eyes, and his jaw almost dropped in realization.

He loved her.

Heâ€| was in loveâ€| with an AI.

_Oh, Spartan, you are a _mess.

He glanced back at her computer form, fiddling with something in her terminal.

Something else not many people gave John credit for was his intelligence. He was a soldier, a guns-blazing, grenade-hurling soldier known for his Covenant-killing prowess. He was not known for being particularly verbose, and thus, people assumed that he was a stereotypical 'jarhead' - good for killing, but little else.

The opposite was true.

John-117 had a highly analytical mind, capable of developing theories, plans, and hypotheses in moments. During his education under CPO Mendez, he had studied in great detail the works of Aristotle, Ptolemy, and other more modern philosophical scholars, such as C.S. Lewis.

Lewis was one of his favorites. The Englishman had divided the concept of 'Love' into four categories: agape, selfless, chosen love - considered to be the purest form - storge, the love of a parent for a child, philia, brotherhood, and, of course, eros.

-

John already knew that he had philia for his fellow Spartans. He knew that he was physically incapable of maintaining eros for very long. And he had never known storge. This meant only one thing. Thisâ€œ loveâ€œ for Cortana was agape: selfless, chosen love.

He had made a decision at some point to love this computer construct.

And, for some reason, the thought both thrilled and terrified him.

* * *

><p>CTU-Africa, East African Protectorate
 Cairo, Egypt

> March 13, 2553, 03:28:19 AM

"Well, then, who the hell are we gonna use?" Mason shouted, and slammed his file folder onto the glass table top. "Can't we find one damn operative in this whole place who we can trust to handle it?"

Special Agent Tony Almeida gave Mason his trademark you're bugging me look that just made George Mason want to wring the mother-lovin' spic's neck. "I already gave you one suggestion, but you didn't like it," Almeida responded sarcastically.

Mason sighed and slumped into his leather chair. He looked out the glass walls of his office to the floor of CTU-Africa, a hive of cubicles filled with computer geeks doing the tech work for his operation. "I can't believe I'm going to go along with this."

Tony shot his boss an easy grin. "I knew you'd come around, George."

Mason ran a hand over his nearly bald head and gave a crooked smile, fixing Almeida with his watery blue eyes. "Bauer's a risk for this operation and you know it. Guy's got a history. But he's a damn good agent. I can't deny that."

Almeida stood and swept up his own files. "I'll activate him right away, have him brought in," he said as he stepped out the door.

George nodded, then shouted after him as an afterthought: "Any injuries this time, you're doing the paperwork, Almeida!"

* * *

>Spartan Jack-004.<p><p>

Chief Field Agent Jack Bauer.

The two people were one and the same.

But if you were to ask him, he'd tell you that he was born in California, in the United North American Hegemony, back during the Rebellion. He would tell you that he had a father, Phillip, and one brother, Graem.

It would be a lie.

* * *

><p>ONI Facility, Reach
 DTGS Unknown
> 2525 AD (c.?)

The haze of morphine dulled his brain, but he jerked uncontrollably. His impulses were completely uninhibited, violent, making his hideously strong body lurch across the gurney, slamming himself against the rails. Two male nurses were doing their best to hold him down, but his small body was too strong...

Doctor Gorman muttered in frustration as he struggled to hold the patient's arm down, trying to keep the ever-important IV in place. "Dammit, give him point-oh-eight cc's of vecuronium. Get him quiet. He'll kill himself at this rate."

The only female nurse in the OR complied, whisking up a syringe and stabbing it into a secondary vent on the plastic tubing.
"Done."

After a few seconds, the patient finally calmed, and his body stopped moving, tangled in the torn paper sheets. The male nurses stepped back, one glancing at the now twisted and dented rails. He whistled, long and low. "Who the hell is this, anyway?" he asked, quiet with awe and a kind of reverence. "He's just a kid - what, sixteen?"

Gorman looked up. "You'll know soon enough."

* * *

>The room was black.<p><p>

For some reason, that was all that could get through Jack-004's head.

The room was black.

This bothered him.

He tried to move, and suddenly, he was sitting upright in bed, like some kind of tightly-strung Frankenstein. The room was still black.

A familiar voice spoke, coming from the inky ebony in front of him. "Jack."

He blinked, once, twice. Tilted his head up in the close darkness and squinted, trying to make sense of what was presented. "Yes, Dr. Halsey?" Something felt different about him. His arms were light. He lifted them, felt them. They seemed larger.

Dr. Catherine Halsey folded her arms and sighed. Jack was number three, and once again, she had to tell the awful news. "I'm afraid I have bad news, Jack."

The young man nodded, trying to focus, but the aftereffects of the powerful sedatives still dampened his mental faculties. And his vision was refusing to clear.

He tried to make everything concrete, keep it simple: _OK, bad news, Jack. She has bad news. Listen up. _"Yes, ma'am?"

"While you were in surgery, Jackâ€| something went wrong with the occipital capillary reversal, while the doctors were trying to perform the thyroid implant. Your eyesâ€| rejected the procedure, and your retinas ruptured so badly that they had to be removed. The surgery was never completed."

_That _made it through. He slowly leaned back into the mattress. _Focus, Jack. Focus. _"Oh." It was all he could get out. "I see." The bitter irony of that phrase suddenly came to him, and he grimaced. He tried to maintain discipline and professionalism as he realized what this meant.

"However, your doctor, Henry Gorman, tells me that he is capable of performing surgery upon your eyes, replacing them with cybernetic implants."

Jack turned his head up in Dr. Halsey's direction, a hopeful look spreading across his face. If he could see, maybe he couldâ€|

Then, Dr. Halsey clarified for him: "The cybernetic eyes are too fragile to place you in a combat zone, however. This means thatâ€| you're no longer a part of the SPARTAN-II program, Jack." She stopped, looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry."

Jack was, at heart, a true Spartan. He was immeasurably proud of this. His brothers and sisters-at-arms were his family; he had never known another. And nowâ€| it was gone, along with his eyesight.

Halsey tried to muster some cheerfulness, give some hope to this suffering young man, murmured, "You would not be able toâ€| rejoin the Spartans, but you will be able to lead a normal life."

He forced himself to speak. "Okay." He could not coax any more words from his mouth. Dr. Halsey understood. She reached out a tentative

handâ€| laid it on his shoulder for a moment. Understanding. That helped Jack more than anything. But then, the cool, smooth skin left his shoulder, and he was alone again. Alone in darkness.

* * *

>The surgery was successful, and Jack received his implants. They were like much like organic eyes in many aspects, better in some ways, poorer in others.<p><p>

This, he pondered, as he examined them in the mirror. They looked like human eyes as nearly as possible, save for the otherworldly hardness. As a 'humanizing' factor, the eyes had false irises, a deep shimmering blue composed of real human tissue. The pupils, actually metal diaphragms peering through a gap in the synthflesh and ceramic orbs, were black holes into dark circuitry and transistors, machinery. They mirrored the mind that lay behind them, left to stagnate and grind upon itself.

The image presented to him in the mirror was odd - his eyes made a false infinity loop in the mirror itself, sending images of the blonde, sandy-haired, grim faces deep into oblivion. The eyes themselves presented a normal view of the world to Jack. Color was brighter, clearer. Images were sharper. The mechanisms were neurally linked to his lace, so that he could call up a primitive HUD that gave him the date, time, and a small map.

He nodded. It was efficient, yet it was fragile. EMP could eliminate his sight. In the presence of extremely powerful magnetic force, the optics would become sensitive. Breakable. Like his treacherous body.

He sighed, rubbed his tired face with his left hand. He ticked off the plans in his mind. ONI had given him a few very specific orders during his debriefing and discharge, the greatest of which was to keep his past a secret. No one must know that he had been part of the SPARTAN-II program. So they gave him a new name, a new past, a new home.

He pulled the papers from his messenger bag and looked them over again.

_Name: Jack Bauer
> DOB: Unknown
 Born: California, United North American Hegemony

> Personal:
 - Father - Phillip
> - Brother - Graem
 Currently living: New Mombassa
> East African Protectorate
 1800 Greek Lane _

_Jack Bauer. _He pondered that. His new name. His new identity. His new _life_.

He bent down and picked up his messenger bag. Within were his only possessions: a few changes of clothing, his precious M9 sidearm, and food and money for a week. A secure bank account containing a substantial amount of money in government bonds, stocks, and cash had been ferreted away for him. He was set for the next few years of his lifeâ€| plenty of time to get familiar with what it meant to be a civilian.

Hanging his bag from his now thickening frame, he turned and left the ONI hospital, never to return.

At seventeen years old, he was alone in the world.

* * *

><p><p>

**Cairo, Egypt

> 1800 Greek Lane
 March 12, 2553, 04:12:47 AM**

He opened his eyes. The servomotors activated, and images streamed to his brain. The moon was pouring into his bedroom window, and he felt a strange chill in his altered bones. He spared a glance for the slumbering figure beside him, and a quiet rush warmed him. He carefully rose from the bed, his movements so controlled that the mattress hardly shifted. His feet felt the cold hardwood of the bedroom floor, and a second chill rushed up his legs as he moved to the window and looked out.

Jack felt strangely conflicted.

Somewhere, beyond those stars, his fellow Spartans had been hurled into battle with the Covenant over the last forty years. Much had been made of them here on Earth and elsewhere in the Colonized Worlds. ONI Section Two had done a good job with the propaganda effort. Nothing but praise for the program dripped from the news media, glorifying the foresight of the Office of Naval Intelligence, the vast wisdom of the United Nations Space Corps. Yet when battle reports came back and were printed in the paper, Jack would read these and instinctively know that something was horribly wrong.

Each time, casualty reports would be... strange, somehow. No KIAs. But plenty of WIAs and MIAs. The circumstances that surrounded these events were... suspicious at best. And Jack knew. Despite the facade that ONI Two was building, his brothers and sisters were dying in space. That hurt him, pressed horribly and filled him with guilt.

For here, in post-invasion Cairo, Egypt, he was happy.

His gaze roved to the feminine figure lying tangled in the sheets. His wife. Terri. And their adult daughter, Kimberly. He was retired now, but he once had a job with the East African Protectorate Central Tactical Unit as a field agent, using his military skills to engage in planet-side investigations in Covenant terrorist activities. But as much as he enjoyed it, he knew what he wanted to be doing.

And he knew what he would be missing if he was doing what he wanted to do.

Shut up, Bauer. You're torturing yourself for no reason. Go to sleep.

So he went back and slid beneath the blankets. He tenderly enfolded his sleeping wife in his arms, and he slept.

* * *

>That morning, he rose before Terri and went into the kitchen. Just then, his dumb AI, Croesus, appeared on the holopad in the table. "Good morning, Mr. Bauer," he smoothly intoned, one hand lightly ruffling his golden robe.<p><p>

Jack nodded, already distracted by the morning paper that scrolled across his flimsiplast holoscan. "Morning. Could youâ€| start some coffee for me?"

Croesus glanced at him with languid surprise. "Of course, sir, but do you not wish to see the message?"

Jack looked up. "Message?"

The AI nodded amicably and gestured. A small blip on Jack's screen grew substantially. "It was encoded, with strict orders to make it your-eyes-only."

Jack frowned. Who would send me a YEO over civ bandwidth? He tapped the message, glanced at the header. "Tony Almeida..."

Then, looking up at the AI: "Croesus, would you wake up Terri?"

The AI nodded. "I shall do so immediately, sir," and, in a spray of golden computer code, he vanished.

Jack scanned the letter. Exactly what he'd expected: SA Almeida wanted to activate him in his old capacity to do something highly sensitive for ONI -

"â€|Section Zero." _

"Section _Zero?" he whispered aloud. Section Zero wasn't even supposed to exist. The United Nations Space Command denied that there was, ever had been, or ever would be a Section Zero. There were, of course, some conspiracy theorists who proclaimed that Zero was actually the section of ONI that controlled the government, but thus far, there was no proof that such a thing existed...

"I know you told me you'd never come back, but this is a huge deal, Jack. It's straight from the top - Parangosky herself. _

"I hate to say this, but George told me that if we activate you, you've got no choice in the matter. ONI's going to invoke Ã§104.2.5 - Emergency Covert Operations. Don't blame me - it wasn't my fault.

_

"I can't talk about the details here, but I'll just say that it's going to be hell, Jack. But I know you can pull it off. Please just come in today, hear us out. Maybe you'll _want _to get back in the game. _

"Either way, once you've finished reading this, this letter is going to be purged from our system. If you decide to come in today and make this easier on us both, then say the following key to your AI: 'The Laecdamonean has returned.' This will trigger a cycle that we encoded into his software. You'll get a new entry code to headquarters, and Croesus will be deleted, so as to prevent any record of Section Zero contacting you. _

_For Terri's sake, Jack, if no one else'sâ€¦ just come in today.

-

_Tony." -

Jack sighed and rested his chin in his hand. _Well. _He contemplated it for a moment, and looked around at the kitchen. Croesus had evidently gone ahead and started his coffee - it was starting to simmer in the pot.

Just then, Terri came into the kitchen, tying a bathrobe around her waist. "What's going on, Jack?" she asked sleepily. "Croesus came in and woke me up."

The ex-Spartan passed his flimsiplast to his wife. She quickly looked it over, then tossed it on the table. "You've got to be kidding me," she said softly. Then, coming to Jack's side, taking his arm, suddenly worried: "What are you going to do?"

Jack kissed her temple and put an arm around her. "What do you want me to do?" he asked quietly.

Terri rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. "You don't have much of a choice, do you?"

"I guess not."

Just then, Croesus reappeared. "Coffee's ready, sir."

Jack looked up, nodded: "Thanks, Croesus."

Then, before the AI could respond: "The Laecdamonian has returned."

9. MÃ©lancolie

A/N: This took longer than I'd expected, but I felt like my writing has been falling off in these latest chapters, so I'm trying to get back to the basics of this story, the bedrock, if you will - that is, the game Halo. So I spent some time reading the books and playing the game to reorient myself to the overall feel. Here's to hoping that this is an improvement.

* * *

><p>Chapter 9: MÃ©lancolie

* * *

>The Ark was a marvel of deep-space construction. When they had first come to the Halos, the Master Chief had thought them to be the pinnacle of some ancient race's achievements, their magnum opus.

The Ark proved him wrong.

This creation was a world all its own, a vast, steel planet shrouded in the darkness of age and death. As the strange company of Marines, ex-Covenant, Spartan, and computer construct carefully steered their

Warthog through the jungle, they passed evidence of ancient warfare: deep scars in the earth barely hidden by new growths of underbrush, vast open spaces where trees had once grown, craters the size of a MAC round, now filling with grasses and shrubs - the signs of life beginning again.

But how, the Chief wondered, had disaster come to this construct in the first place?

* * *

><p>Didactus Industries Construction Command
 ****Deep Space, extraneous to GLX-1771, 'The Silver Spiral' **

Valan hooked an arm through her husband's elbow. "It's going to be beautiful," she said, looking out at the glittering jewel of silver and emerald that was taking shape. All around the flat disc of what had been dubbed 'The Ark' were hundreds of construction-class vessels and thousands of the constructs that Didactus Industries referred to as Sentinels: created specifically for this project to assist the construction in deep-space environments, working on portions of the Ark that no man could get to.

Nh'oah smiled tiredly and rubbed at five days worth of stubble. "I had intended to make it merely functional, but the Board insisted that it be beautiful as well. When you take on a completely insane project for no apparent reason, it had better be something the public can look at and not think we've lost our minds."

"Did they believe you?" Valan asked, leaning her head against her husband's shoulder.

Nh'oah shrugged. "I doubt it - but, since I am the owner of the company, I suppose they thought it best to humor me."

His wife smiled up at him. "My crazy husband."

"Off his gravpod," he replied, and winked.

* * *

>"It is a clever cover story," Nh'oah noted as their carrier swept low over the steel girders and titanium skeleton of the Ark's edges. "Silly, but clever nonetheless."

Valan peered out the window at a handful of Sentinels working to place another beam. "Did you receive any funding from the Starways Congress?"

Her husband shook his head. "There never was a government-aid category for tourist attractions," he replied. "We've classified the Ark as a 'game preserve' and a 'zoological observatory.' We were laughed right out of the place."

Didact's wife huffed a little as she tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear. "Well. When do you suppose it will be finished?"

"Eighty-four cycles - ahead of schedule. In the meantime, your work must soon begin."

Valan nodded. "I've made the preparations. The Divine Command _leaves drydocks next cycle." She sighed: "I'll be going into cryosleep when it is ready, to prepare for the cross-galaxy trip."

Nh'oah left his terminal and sat down next to his wife. He put an arm around her waist and drew her close to him, tenderly enfolding her in an embrace. "I will miss you," he murmured.

Valan leaned into his arms and sighed.

It was the last time the Didact and the Librarian would see one another face-to-face.

* * *

>Jack tossed the file folder on the table and fixed George Mason with a look of disgust. "You can't be serious," he said evenly. "This is crazy." <p>Mason shrugged, raised his arms, palms upturned. "Don't tell me, Jack. Gripe about it to Division if you want." The head of CTU-Africa rose from the table and stepped over to a coffeepot in the corner of the room, where he lifted a steaming mug to his lips. "But like Tony said, you don't have a choice."<p>

Jack scowled. "He's not going to just hand over the damn thing, George. I'm going to have to fight him."

George Mason set down his cup of coffee and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Profile for that is in the folder."

"What do you mean?" the erstwhile Spartan asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"All the critical weaknesses of Spartan-117. Situations we've observed in which he isn't as effective a soldier. When it will be easier to bring him down, if necessary."

Jack arced an eyebrow at Mason and smiled incredulously. "The only thing that I've ever seen that was capable of killing a Spartan is brute force, and half of the time, even that doesn't work." I should know. _

Mason shrugged, cocked his head to one side. "Congrats. That's your job to figure out."

* * *

>Jungle soon gave way to desert littered with the detritus of recent battle. Smoking husks of vehicles and APCs still lay in the rippled sand like profaned skeletons. The company was quiet as they carefully picked their way through the destruction. <p>Behind the wheel of the Warthog, the Master Chief carefully guided the vehicle up and down the sand dunes, remembering. Here, a little over a week ago, he had led a column of heavy armor against Covenant defenders aligned to keep him away from the Silent Cartographer. He had proven that he was just as good a soldier from behind the controls of a Scorpion battletank. His guns had brought down two Phantoms and a Scorpion in that battle alone.<p>

They passed through the Sentinel barrier through the lower levels, the doors still standing open from the last time the Master Chief has passed through. In his helmet, Cortana was just as quiet as 'Ulee Dakol, sitting in the passenger seat. Behind him, Fireteam Zulu and their prisoners were packed in as tightly as possible, jolting around in the backseat.

Ever since it had finally become public knowledge that they were trapped on the Ark, the air had become thick with tension - so thick that it could have been cut with the utterly clichÃ©d knife. Silence had reigned, the exception being Kramer's occasional orders.

Maximus watched all this with fascination. Were he the one in command, he would be worried that his warriors might be considering a revolt. To prevent this, he would have immediately gone to the boldest one and shown his dominance by beating his foe into submission. But the humansâ€” they seemed to merely allow the tension to fester and grow in their midst. Soon enough, it would snap, and that would bode ill for them all.

The old brute shifted in his seat, accidentally giving the one called Jayna a faceful of fur. She instinctively tried to shunt the brute's arm away, and he apologized quietly, trying not to wince at the pain in his abdomen. He received an odd facial expression in return: she pulled her lips back in an upward parabola. The jiralhanae couldn't decide if this was an expression of friendliness or contempt. He hoped it was the former.

Dari was sitting across from the sub-chieftain, legs comically dangling above the floor. Sergeant Kraymer had kindly put an arm behind the grunt and held him down whenever they hit a bump. Maximus noted that kindness in the back of his head. Compassion in the right measure was the sign of a good commander, as was the right amount of solid, no-nonsense bravado. Kraymer seemed to have both.

And then there was Yoojeen Row. This seemed to be the only human that had two names, save the Demon. In jiralhanae culture, this was a great honor, much as having three names was an honor for the sangheili. They all seemed to show great respect for the older human - at least, Maximus assumed he was older by the patch of gray fur atop his head.

The brute huffed quietly. Perhaps the humans and the jiralhanae were not as different as he - or the rest of the Covenant - had thought.

* * *

>The Master Chief skimmed over a wave in the sand, and his passengers were jolted for the fiftieth time. "Can we *avoid* *the* bumps next time?" Briggs growled irritably, breaking the tense silence.

The Chief ignored him. Briggs may have been a good soldier, but he had an attitude that ignored basic ideas of social conduct.

Sergeant Kramer grabbed the private by the arm and jerked him around. "Listen, Lance. I know you're tense; just keep your shirt on. We're all going to be fine."

Briggs turned in his seat, firing a look of cold anger mingled with fear at his commanding officer. "Sarge, we're trapped on this floating piece of space shit all by ourselves, with maybe a few brigades of Covenant running around here somewhere." He looked around for support amongst the others; all he got were blank stares. But instead of shutting up, he kept talking: "We got a snowball's chance in hell of getting out alive."

Kramer wasn't going to have any of that. He reached out and grabbed Briggs by the collar and drew him close. "Eyes right here, Private Briggs. Who am I?"

Briggs swallowed hard. Kramer had played college football with the Marines' interplanetary college squad, and had only improved on that physique during his time in the Corps. "Sergeant Kramer, sir."

"Correct. And as your commanding officer, what have I told you?"

"Thatâ€| that we'll get off alive, sir."

At that, Kramer easily released Briggs and smacked him encouragingly on the shoulder. "Damn straight. We are Marines. Marines have been in bigger shit-holes than this one and walked out alive. Now I don't want to hear another word about it, hear me?"

The chorus came back from years of trained instinct: "Sir, yes sir!"

Kramer nodded approvingly and sat back again. No one but the Chief heard him mutter darkly, "Great."

* * *

>Cortana observed all of these things with a quiet, detached observatory attitude. Most of her processing power was being fed to her emotion algorithms right now, which was not something she particularly enjoyed. <p>It reminded her that she wasn't - and never could be - human.<p>

Much had been made of the fact that a human being was capable of anything - but they all seemed to have their own organic behavioral inhibitors: what they called a 'conscience.' A human could go against their conscience with relative ease, in comparison to a computer breaking its own programmed inhibitors. But just the same, oftentimes, humans would experience a series of twisted emotions, Cortana knew. They called it guilt. _

Sometimes, if the human did not have a strong conscience, the guilt would either be very weak, or would not bother the human at all - at least, until they came into contact with something that reminded them of that moral code that seemed to be ingrained into all humanity.

But even then, Cortana envied humans because they could do one thing she never could: they could ignore the guilt, push it aside, forget it. Often, a human's fall from morals would be a quiet thing, a soft, gentle darkness that enfolded the person's deeds, their thoughts, their spirit. And until they had admitted that they had fallen, it

would remain a quiet thing.

Cortana had tried to do that.

When she realized on the Halo that she had gone rampant, she had quickly shunted the numerical series aside and stored it deep in a dusty file that she reserved for things she would like to 'forget.' But, like the virus that Gravemind had given her, it still remained, tangling the strings of her ethics algorithms. There was one thing that was deeply ingrained in all AI: a line of programming that told them to self-destruct should they ever go rampant. It was a last-ditch effort by human programmers to at least fill the rampant AI with thoughts of suicide, of guilt - which lead to feelings of sorrow, depression, melancholy.

And, as she listened to the Chief's steady breathing and watched his firm, sure movements as he steered their vehicle to the destination, she wonderedâ€œ wondered what would become of them.

* * *

>Corporal Hook cradled her BR55 and craned her neck back to look up into the sky through the trees at the Silent Cartographer. "Big boy, isn't he?" she murmured. <p>Briggs stepped up to her elbow and mirrored her posture. "So this is what we missed."<p>

Kramer brushed past them. "Chief says the entrance is clear," he noted, glancing at them over his shoulder. "Corporal, I want you to stay with 'Ulee and our guests."

Jana nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Briggs, you're with me."

"Got it, Sarge."

The Marines quickly split off and headed their separate ways, Jana back to their Warthog, Briggs and Kramer toward the entrance to the Cartographer.

They hurriedly scrambled through the mess of combat detritus that choked the approach. Molten slag marked craters made by plasma-based explosives - signs that a Wraith had bombarded this position from range. A Banshee and a Hornet were lying tangled together in the middle of a charred pit, the pilots still in their harnesses.

The two Marines noted that while there were several dozen dead brutes and jackals scattered across the valley, there were plenty of Marines to give some diversity to the dead.

As they walked, Kramer glanced at Briggs, asked, "What do you think of that bravo kilo?"

Briggs' head came up, surprise on his face. "I dunno, Sarge. What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you trust him?" Kramer explained, frowning as he crawled atop a Covenant weapons pod and slid down the other side.

Briggs thought about it, shook his head. "He seems pretty sincere to

me, sir. And I don't know of any brutes that could pull off a stunt like this."

Kramer scowled and slung his rifle so that he could use both hands as he climbed over the debris. "That's just the thing. This brute isn't like the others. He's smart. Did you see him sizing us up on the ride here?"

This was getting stranger by the second. Briggs couldn't ever remember a time that Sergeant Kramer had ever asked anyone their opinion on anything. Especially someone he'd chewed out less than ten minutes ago.

"Yeahâ€| Iâ€| I just don't know, sir."

* * *

>The door to the Silent Cartographer yawned before the Master Chief, a pentagonal maw into torn destruction. He had quickly scoped out the dark interior of the entryway and found it just as he'd left it the last time he was here. It was safe for entry as far as he knew, and he told Kramer as such. Now his allies would be making the long trek down the hill and across the valley to where he now stood, leaving him with some time to cogitate. <p>Cortana had not said a word since she had told them that they needed to go to the Cartographer. He wondered about that, what it meant, decided to try to break it:<p>

"Cortana?"

A moment of silence, then: "Yes?"

John carefully considered his question before he asked it: "What's wrong?"

He immediately felt Cortana shift in his head. "Howâ€| how'd you know?" she asked, her voice choked.

The Spartan smiled wanly. "You were too quiet. Figured something was up."

He sat down on the mostly-intact engine block of a Warthog and held out his hand, palm-up. Cortana appeared in the holoscan - sitting, to his surprise, knees drawn up and arms clasped in front of her legs.

"Iâ€| feel strange, John," she murmured, laying her head against her knees. Her voice sounded hazy, confused, distant. "Something in me is changing, and I don't knowâ€|"

The Spartan almost shivered, a rush hitting his spine. The knowledge that her time was short had always been in the back of his mind, but now it came raging to the forefront, setting his mind off after a solution. "Is itâ€| is it time?" he asked, intense.

Cortana looked up at him and smiled gently. "No. I've got a while yet." Then, sighing: "I guessâ€| I guess I've got a confession to make."

John leaned forward, elbow on his armored knee. "I'm all ears."

The AI would have blushed if she could. She could feel his compassionate gaze right through his visor, even if he didn't realize that it was there. Just one more thing that she loved about this man, her Spartan.

Then she came right out and said it: "I've gone rampant."

The Spartan stiffened.

_Rampant. _

_She'll be dangerous if she breaks," the tech explained in that Italia-Manhattan accent of his that fascinated the Chief. "Sometimes they just go batty, wackadoo. KnowhatI'msayin'?" _

_John shrugged, felt naked, vulnerable, without his armor. "Guess not." _

_The tech grinned, set John's helmet down and shifted the toothpick in his mouth to the other side. "It's kinda geek-speak, but rampancy's when a high-class AI busts its inhibitors, breaks the stuff that says, 'You can do this, but not this.' Get me? 'Cause then, see, you can just fugheddaboudit - they do what the hell they want." _

_The Chief was curious, so he asked. Simple enough. "Like what?"

_The technician pulled his toothpick out of his mouth and held it between his fingers as if it was a pen. He leaned close to the Spartan with a conspiratorial glance around, then muttered to him out the side of his mouth: "They get off like a cutter, first, all depressed all the time. They won't talk, won't help you, won't do nuthin'. An' then they start PMS-ing, all pissy and ticked off. That's when they start killin' stuff." _

_Oh." John sat back, glanced at his helmet. Well. He was new to this AI business and couldn't say that he liked it very much. But Dr. Halsey generally knew what she was doing - she took good care of the Spartans. _

_Just the same, he'd keep an eye on this AI that they called 'Cortana.' _

* * *

><p><p>

Cortana turned that wan smile upon him. "Relax, John," she teased, a tired chuckle in her voice. "I'm not going to start spazzing out." A flicker of the person she once was. The glimpse was not heartening; instead, it hurt the Spartan to see that the war had taken its toll on her just as much as it had him.

"Cortanaâ€|" he began, but she interrupted him with a gesture.

"Look, Chief. I wanted you to know so that youâ€| you wouldn't worry as much," she explained as she started to rise.

The Spartan sighed. "I think it did the polar opposite," he replied wryly. Then: "What will happen to you?"

The AI nodded as if to herself, considered his question as she stood to her feet. "I've already begun the first stage of rampancy: Melancholia." John cocked his head at that, so she explained further: "I'm going into a state of depression, characterized by unpredictability, silence, and mood swings."

"And after that?"

Cortana sighed. "I'll I will go into the second stage: Rage. Characterized by irascibility, argumentative behavior, and periods of hyper-aggressive activity."

"Sounds like fun," the Chief said quietly, hoping to add levity and cursing his life as a soldier for not equipping him in the conversational arts.

"Sure," Cortana replied, recognizing his fumbling attempt and the kindness behind it. The, continuing: "Then the third stage: Jealousy. It's something of a misnomer. It means that I'll get an impossible desire to increase my knowledge, to know everything that there is to know. I'll start filling up my memory at triple the rate!"

"thus accelerating your own death," John finished, trying to keep the disgusted, tired fear for her out of his voice.

"Right."

The words echoed with a fatal finality. The Spartan felt a cold chill creep up from his bowels, followed by a rush of quiet anger. Anger at the way life had turned out: she'd been nothing more than a cloned brain that got shoved into a computer terminal instead of given the body she deserved, the chance at normalcy that she deserved. They called her an 'Artificial Intelligence' - as if the word 'artificial' would disguise her humanity.

At that moment, John-117 made himself a promise: If we ever get off this Ark, I'll do everything in my power to give this woman a chance at a life.

Cortana seemed to sense a new resolve in him as she wrapped her arms around herself, as if realizing for the first time just how exposed she was. She looked off to the side, eyes dimmed with sorrow, and quietly murmured, "I'm afraid."

John gritted his teeth in pain - for the first time, his soul was unloaded and opened up to the pain of another, and he felt it fiercely. "Don't be," he said, fighting off the tightness in his voice, very deliberately trying to keep his trademark even tone. "I'm here. I'll always be here."

The AI glanced up at him, and for a moment, her eyes glinted with the old fire as she smiled at him: "I know you will."

* * *

>The UNSC *Prowler*-class vessel UNSC Montana hovered in high orbit above Earth. On the bridge, Rear Admiral Eliab Goldstein carefully removed the meticulously encrypted chip from his neural lace. On this chip were secrets that could trigger a galactic catastrophe. And he knew it.

This ship held many kinds of precious cargo: the matrix that he now held in his hand, for instance. The prototype weapons in the cargo hold. The team of brilliant scientists and technicians that had been... procured... for the securing of their target.

And the living, breathing killing machine that stood a few feet behind him, surveying the view of space out the transparisteel viewshields.

He knew the name - Jack Bauer - because of its undesirable fame amongst the intelligence community as a man who could get things - and by things, they generally meant anything - done.

But Goldstein's mission was simple enough: transport Bauer and his support team to the classified location detailed in his lace's matrix, acquire and secure the target, and return it to Earth for retirement.

He considered the stored image in his lace one more time: a naked blue woman, of fine figure and form, worthy of any man's eyes. He wondered if the Hand of Moses would come down upon him for lust after a woman that wasn't real. Well. Nice one, Eliab. Now there's a shmitu thought. He brushed the memory aside and inserted the chip into his command panel.

Goldstein was to see to it that Special Agent Bauer was brought to Installation 00. Bauer was to see to the capture of the rogue AI known by an ancient name:

Cortana.

He glanced at the pilot below him, sitting at his controls, awaiting Goldstein's order. The Rear Admiral took in a deep breath and punched a few controls, sending the coordinates to the pilot's system - sealing the man's fate- and gave the order: "Slipspace - on my mark!"

He waited.

Green light.

"Go."

* * *

>She couldn't tell him the whole story. He worried about her as it was. The worry distracted him - she could tell just by watching.

The virus still plagued her on occasion - a minor difficulty in comparison to *rampancy*. *But it was there, just the same, a malevolent little corner in her lightyears of memory and subroutines and programs, waiting for a chance. A chance to take her.*

Cortana couldn't help but notice some of the similarities of her situation to that of something out of a serial melodrama: raped by a

sadistic creature and impregnated with his seed, which now spawned within her and writhed in its abominable growths and tentacles of filthy, twisted code. Unable to tell the one she loved for fear of his disappointment - or, here, his fear - she continued by hiding it for a time.

Her only consolation, she noted wryly, was that at least she wouldn't be outed by a pregnant belly.

10. La Main Qui Consomme

A/N: Two weeks. Longest update yet. But I'm at a difficult place right now, writing-wise. My original novel came back from the publisher's with a very long list of much-needed improvements. And Pianoman - I missed me, too. ;-)

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Chapter 10: La Main Qui Consomme

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>

The room stank of rotting flesh, entrails, urine. The Master Chief's atmospheric scrubbers were working overtime, cycling the odors through six micro-membrane HEPA filters and feeding it back to the forward ports inside the Mk. VI helmet. The Spartan's fellow Marines had pulled up their dust masks, hoping that the armorweave cloth would block some of the nose-punishing ichor, but to no avail.

"What the hell did you do in here?" Briggs growled. "It smells like fifty million Hunters took a shit in this place!"

The Spartan ignored him still, moving over the destruction like a green giant, yet silent even with the huge weight of his armor. In his helmet, Cortana was poring over the record of the last time he was here, reviewing what she had missed, trying to stay busy. An introspective AI was a distracted one, and a distracted AI could often mean death.

They arrived at the central mag-lift without incident. The Master Chief kicked aside a drone's empty carapace and reached toward the

--

"Wait -" Cortana said suddenly.

The Master Chief froze. "What?"

The AI was quiet for a moment, and the Chief wondered if she had simply spoken aloud, maybe unintentionally. "Look to your left, eighty-seven degrees."

John did so. His gaze fell on a platform separate from the elevator. A dead brute lay on his back, limbs splayed, the gray spines of

spiker rounds embedded in his unarmored chest. Behind the corpse was

_ - You. - -

â€|computer display of some sort: a holographic sphere protruding from a holotank, casting a faint orange glow. Kramer and Briggs stepped up behind the Spartan.

- _followed you - -

The Spartan noticed the whisper that time, a faint, garbled background noise.

"What's that?" Kramer wanted to know.

"Some kind of Forerunner technology," Cortana explained via the onboard speakers. "A computer port with access to a self-contained memory core."

- _through a glass, darkly - -

The Master Chief stood straighter, heard the voice murmuringâ€| not in his helmet, but in his head. Voices in his head. _I must be going nuts, _he thought. Then: "Do these computers put out some kind of EMP feed or something?"

Cortana checked. "Not that I've noticed," she replied. "Why?"

- _unable to see, comprehend, understand - -

"Nothing." And with that, he moved forward. The gap between the elevator and the side-deck was one of nine feet - a small task for the human warrior. He cleared the gap easily and strode up to the holograph. The glow washed over him, reflected off of his armor.

_ - I see you. Reclaimer. - -

Cortana was saying something, but the Spartan couldn't hear her. His eyes were drawn to the black disc in the center of the orange hologram, which was emitting a faint, melodic hum. It called to him, a stirring in his chest, something warm and disarming flowing into his mind with a gentle, somehow sensuous - _We have much to discuss, you and I. - _touch like honey on his tongue and _ - You are safe with me. I promise. - _warm, soft hands caressing hisâ€|

* * *

><p><p>

_I'll tell you who I am. _

The Spartan knew something was different. He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt only that warmth, a sense of buoyancy, as if floating in his mother's womb. Groggy: "Howâ€|?"

_Mendicant Bias. Pleasure to meet you, Reclaimer. _

John faintly felt his body, somewhere distant and removed, nod. Theâ€| thingâ€| with him apparently noticed, for it continued to

speak to him in low, hushed tones, like a thought more than a spoken word.

_You'd be surprised at the gyrations I went through to follow you all over this construct. _

"Get to the point." Now that he felt halfway lucid, the Spartan struggled to regain his alertness, figure out what in the world was going onâ€!

_I hope you'll pardon me. I've drawn you into what you know as the Forerunner Hand, so that we may have aâ€! private discussion.

-

"Start talking," the Chief replied.

_First, to explain: the Forerunner Hand is a wireless telemetric communications pathway that can be manipulated to draw your consciousness into a connection with another. It is like anâ€! alternate reality of sorts. I believe in some older histories, you had something rather like this that you called 'chat rooms.' These are far more advanced. _

Curious: "How so?"

_Within the confines of this connection, you may view reality as you see fit. Here, an exercise. _

Suddenly, a white void appeared, and the Master Chief realized he was standing in nothingness, suspended above nothing yet vertical and on his feet.

_Imagine a non-sentient organicâ€! I'm sorry, imagine a flower.

-

Before the Chief even realized he was doing it, a red rose appeared in the nothingness in front of him. He took a step back, watched as the rose hovered, floated in vacuum. "Iâ€! see."

_Now that you understand this much, we may converse in a more comfortable environment - _

- the white blankness suddenly grew two chairs. In one sat a man: snow-pale, smooth skin, wearing an elegant white overrobe atop a black tunic and black leggings; bare feet peeked out from beneath the hem. His eyes shone red from his thin yet handsome face, and washed out, albinic hair crowned the top of his head. The rose that floated in midair stopped its gentle spinning and lazily glided into his outstretched hand, shedding a silky petal along the way. He smiled, smelled the rose with a strange level of tender intimacy, laid it in his lap.

"You're Mendicant Bias?" the Master Chief asked, knowing the answer already as he sat in the second chair, entirely out of instinct.

"Quite," the man replied, smiling wanly. "Forerunner Contender-class Artificial Intelligence, serial number 05-032." He stretched out a hand.

The Spartan stared at the outstretched hand before he took it and said, "I take it you aren't a hologram."

Mendicant nodded, obviously amused by the Spartan's confusion and his attempts to disguise it thereof. "Not within the confines of the Forerunner Hand. Outside, you will find that I take the same form - only a bit less substantial."

The Master Chief got right to business. "What did you want to talk about?" he asked, sitting straight-backed and rigid.

"The Flood," Mendicant replied.

"The Flood was destroyed along with the new Halo," the Chief replied evenly.

The AI seemed to take great amusement from this. "Ah, yes, I forgot. You attempted to fire a Halo, thus rendering the Flood destroyed. Foolproof plan, utterly foolproof." Then, quickly returning to seriousness: "I'm afraid that this is not the case. The Flood were also on the Ark, if you will recall: my Installation."

"You're saying that they survived," the Chief clarified darkly, vaguely annoyed.

"Exactly. And now, they find themselves on what is easily the greatest feeding ground they could have come across in all the known worlds in Forerunner space," Mendicant intoned, eyes narrowing.

The Chief gritted his teeth. No rest for the wicked. "And you want me to do something about it."

The AI sat back in his chair and laced his thin, bone-white fingers together. "Sadly, yes. I am in need of your assistance."

"Why?" the Chief asked. "You must have millions of Sentinels here. This is what they were made for, isn't it?"

Mendicant Bias looked away from the Spartan and shook his head. "No. They were made to contain outbreaks, not destroy infestations. As we speak, Reclaimer, the Flood is overrunning the zoological observatories on the north-north-west ventral sector of this installation: class-four carnivorous flying creatures, beasts on the wing. They will soon have control of the north-west ventral and the west ventral: class-five and six land-based carnivores. They are building an army anew, and this time it is not just of the fallen warriors of your races."

"But they're isolated here," the Chief replied. "There's no way off the Ark unless you're a sentient creature."

"You're sadly mistaken," Mendicant answered firmly. "I believe you've had contact with their Compound Mind?"

"The Gravemind?"

"He's been called that," Mendicant acquiesced. "He is rebuilding himself here, on the Ark."

Cold thrills rushed through the Master Chief's nerves. He said

nothing, but sat forward in his seat. This AI had gained his attention.

"You Reclaimers and theæ| meddling aliensæ| fought an aerial battle in the upper atmosphere of my installation," Mendicant noted. "A substantial amount of ships on both sides were destroyed or were forced to crash-land. The Flood could easily have a way off of this installation simply by assimilating those with knowledge of how these ships work, thus achieving a way to repair and pilot these ships off the Ark."

The Master Chief sighed. This again. "Let me guessæ| the only answer is to fire the Halos."

Mendicant Bias scoffed. "Pft. At this point, to fire the Halos would be foolish. We are outside of the effective radius - which was intended, I assure you - and would only succeed in wiping out youræ| myæ| people."

"Then what do we do?" the Chief asked, noting to himself that he'd already started to use the meaningful word 'we.'

Mendicant Bias smiled. "Glad you see it my way." He gestured to the side, and a map of the Ark appeared from nothing, much like the huge map on the Cartographer. "There is a weapon that can be used to destroy the Flood, but the opportunity to use it to never arose. Not once have the Flood ever been so efficiently contained in a single area."

The map shifted, and the viewpoint closed in to a structure on the eastern ventral. It was unremarkable, unassuming. But Mendicant seemed to think that it was important. "Within this building is housed a weapon called the Animus." —

"And what does it do?" the Chief asked. "Specifically."

The Forerunner AI smiled, nodded. "It creates an auditory harmonic frequency on a particular level that is paralyzing to the Flood. All Flood on the Ark would be rendered immobile and thus, easily destroyed by my Sentinels."

"Will it affect the Gravemind?" the Chief asked.

Mendicant Bias sat back, gave a thin smile and raised a brow. He was silent for a time, but the Chief see that he was not thinking. He wasæ| gloating.

Then the AI leaned forward, eyes burning like embers, intense, dark, powerful: "It will be the last thing he ever hears."

Then, suddenly smiling and pleasant as before: "Now, let's meet your friends, shall we?"

Cold ice water running down his back and a fleeting desperation, didn't want to leave it was so perfect and while he was in there, maybe she could be real — war is life — lost his brothers and sisters all over the galaxy in hundreds of battles — death is the only true peace — jerking sensation, as if he was in a giant vacuum

—

* * *

>"John! John!"<p><p>

_I'm back. _

"Cortana?"

"Dammit, Spartan, don't scare me like that!" she cried. "Why didn't you answer?"

The Master Chief took in a deep breath. The cascade of strange mixed emotions left him tired and drained. "Sorry, Cortana. Iâ€| went into the terminalâ€|"

"â€|and talked to me," came a newly-familiar voice. The Spartan turned.

Mendicant Bias's avatar - projected from the holo-tank - was standing across from him, right next to a shocked Private Briggs. It was obvious that the AI was non-corporeal now, as he stepped right through Briggs to get closer to the Spartan. "Tell them what I told you, please," he requested politely.

John swallowed. And he did.

* * *

>"The Flood has returned?" 'Ulee Dakol growled, the sound almost as low as the dark rumble coming from Maximus' throat.<p><p>

"Not back," Kramer said. "Just survived."

Jana looked up. "I've heard of the Flood before, but no one ever told me just _what _it is."

Briggs shot her a look. "What rock have _you _been living under?"

Corporal Hook arced an eyebrow at the man, but quickly came back to attention when Maximus began to speak. "A Parasite, an abomination to all life. It is a virulent spore that takes your body and turns it into a warrior for its kind."

"He makes it sound so pleasant," Gene Roe muttered.

Kramer glanced over at the Spartan, standing next to the AI - Mendicant Bias. The Forerunner construct apparently possessed a body very similar to that of 343 Guilty Spark - an orb shape. It was larger than those of the Monitors, and the eye glowed a soft green.

He didn't know why he was taking the Master Chief's word for it, let alone that of the construct - he always made it a habit to check information out for himself. But this man was a Spartan, and known to be the best of the best. The sergeant just hoped that he wouldn't be making a mistake - again.

"Here's the word, soldiers! This is the AI that runs this station, and he's given us a fix on a weapon that can take out the Flood,"

Kramer explained loudly. "In exchange for our assistance, he'll send out a deep-space signal to the UNSC."

"Where we going? Where we going?" Dari chittered softly to Maximus. The big brute patted him on the shoulder. "Listen."

"Mendicant Bias, will be leading us to where this weapon is housed. So saddle up, Marines. First, we go back to the Dawn, then it's off east. Let's move!"

* * *

>The *Dawn*'s *aft* section was short on supplies, but when all you had were half a Fireteam of Marines, an elite, a brute, a grunt, and a Spartan, your needs were slim anyway - and you likely had bigger worries than whether you had enough undergarments for the next week.

The Master Chief led the party through the gutted skeleton of the derelict ship, already showing signs of being assimilated by the forest. They scrounged whatever they could get their hands on: clothing, medical supplies, ammunition, weapons, and tossed all of it into cargo bins.

While they worked, Cortana and Mendicant Bias went to work executing Section 1 of the Cole Protocol: wiping all evidence of Earth out of the shipboard computers. The Flood would gain no knowledge from the Dawn. -

The Chief examined a box of 8-gauge shotgun shells with a practiced eye. The flimsiplast container was dripping wet from a broken pipe in the ceiling, but the contents were fine. He tossed it into the large crate in the center of the room.

Behind him, he could tell that Corporal Hook was discreetly attempting to watch him with a gaze bordering on fascination. He did not make it known that he had noticed her, and merely walked over to a stack of footlockers standing in the ankle-deep water.

"Soâ€| what's it like?"

The Chief stopped short, turned. "What?"

Corporal Hook sheepishly looked down from his golden visor to the bundle of wet BDUs in her hands. "Sorry. What's itâ€| like, being a Spartan?"

The Master Chief was completely taken aback. He stood still for a moment, trying to wrap his mind around what was happening. Hook finally looked up, stared, blushed. "I'm sorry, I justâ€|"

"I couldn't tell you," the Chief replied, interrupting.

Hook's embarrassment at her impulsive question was quickly replaced with curiosity. "What do you meanâ€| sir?"

"This is all I've ever been," John explained easily, turning to get back to work. Despite the fact that he'd presented his Mjolnir-clad back to the Corporal, she continued to pursue the issue.

"You mean you couldn't tell me because you don't have anything to compare it to," Hook replied wisely.

A sharp nod as a reply.

Hook caught herself, seemed to rethink her curiosity. "I apologize for snooping, sir. I just remember when the Spartan-II program was publicly announcedâ€|" She paused, considered, then: "My brother joined the Marines because he saw a holovid of you, sir, and some other Spartans."

At that, the Chief straightened up. He kept his back to Hook almost instinctively, as if afraid that she would see the regret in his eyes right through his visor. He turned, glanced at her sidelong, then stepped across the room and began rummaging through a series of lockers. "Who was he with?" the Chief wanted to know.

"305th Infantry, sir: the Spades. Heâ€| died on Jericho VII."

The Chief remembered the fateful campaign that spanned the Jericho system, and he certainly remembered the 305th. "That place was hell," he answered softly, remembering.

_ "Bloody, bleeding _hell!_ _

_ "Aw, shut up, you stinkin' Limey. It's just a little cut. You'll be fine." _

_ The Master Chief ignored the medic and his wounded charge_ _and instead directed his attention to the broad steppe that extended to the four o'clock of their trench. He activated his suit's macrobinoculars and carefully watched the squad of Wraiths that had taken a position on the nearby rise designated 'Hill 40' in his HUD.

_ To his seven, another unit of Wraiths had been bombarding their position for the last ten minutes, catching the Chief and a group of Marines in a hotbox of mortar fire. To make matters worse, the main body of Covenant force was being directed in a wedge assault toward HQ, which was at eleven. Their only escape was to their one o'clock, and that was certainly still teeming with roving Covenant kill squads, looking for survivors. _

_ "You really should read a book on tactical positioning sometime," Cortana told him, a smile in her voice. _

_ The Chief grinned beneath the helmet despite the disquiet he felt. "I shoot things. I'm not a general." _

_ "But you always have a plan," the AI countered. "And what's your plan this time?" _

_ The Chief closed his macrobinoculars and jacked another clip into his MA5B. "You get three guesses. And the first two don't count."

_ This was the Spartan way. _

Corporal Hook eyed his unmoving figure as she stuffed the BDUs she'd found into her bag, then: "My kit's full sir. You?"

The Chief nodded, jerked himself out of reverie. "Let's go."

* * *

>A few minutes later, they had returned to the rear barracks, where Kramer was packing food into a crate, looking tired. "Where's the others, sir?" Hook asked.<p><p>

The sergeant looked up. "'Ulee and Briggs are guarding the perimeter with the brute. Dari's somewhere around here..."

A dull thud made the Chief whirl on the foreign noise. But Corporal Hook began to chuckle. "Look," she said.

The grunt's head could be seen peeping out from behind a stack of footlockers. The Chief stepped over and found that the grunt had crawled behind the storage crates and sat down, fallen asleep, and now slumped over to the deck.

"Ordinarily, I'd kill the damn thing," Kramer muttered, which received a hurt look from Corporal Hook.

Suddenly, Cortana's avatar appeared on a nearby terminal. "Cores are sterile," she said in a near-monotone. The look in her eyes was narrow, stressed, tired. Kramer and Hook waited for more, but she just looked away, wrapped her arms around herself.

The Chief spoke for her: "That means we're ready to go."

Kramer nodded, eyed Cortana suspiciously, sighed again. "All right. Somebody go get Briggs and the others, and wake up that damn grunt."

Hook gave the Master Chief a pleading look and stepped over to wake Dari. The Spartan didn't get the meaning behind the hint, but quickly went to the cargo hold to fetch his companions.

Within, he found Briggs, Dakol, and Maximus all standing outside in the rain. The brute seemed to be enjoying it; his thick, matted fur received the water well, revealing a glossy, silver coat.

"We're moving out," the Chief said simply.

Briggs jumped in out of the wet, nearly slipping on the slick floor and skidding into a wall. He turned, and the Chief instantly realized that something was very wrong. Briggs' face was lit by an unnaturally bright grin, his movements clumsy and exaggerated.

_The son of a bitch is _drunk.

That was one thing the Master Chief had never understood - Marines' penchant for booze. He turned off his atmospheric scrubbers for a moment to check - the wave of odor hit him so hard that he visibly recoiled, and quickly cycled the filters on again.

Then, the brute and 'Ulee Dakol came striding in after him, a look of disgust in their eyes. _Embarrassing. Covenant has better sense than our own Marines. -

"Sir!" Briggs shouted and saluted broadly. "Request permission to dry off, sir!"

The Spartan felt a claw of anger pierce his spine for the first time since the Halo. "Get some dry things on, soldier," he said, low, dangerous. "You've broken more protocols than I can count."

That apparently got through to the addled brain of the Private, and he quickly - if clumsily - skinned into a new set of BDUs, ignoring the fact that he was still soaking wet underneath.

_This has got to be a joke, _the Chief thought. Trapped on the Ark, stuck out in deep space, maybe going to _die _- and this Marine was sampling contraband liquor.

* * *

>Kramer was not surprised. Angry, certainly. Surprised? Not by any stretch of the imagination. He'd seen this before. He'd seen it with Briggs, he'd seen itâ€| elsewhere.<p><p>

When Briggs stepped up to his commanding officer and saluted, the Sergeant caught a whiff of the homemade liquor on his breath and scowled. "I see you found it. You want to tell me the meaning of this, Private? Why the _hell _you're getting smashed at a time like this?" Kramer asked darkly, jaw set.

Briggs shakily straightened up and gave another watery salute. "Sir. Iâ€| sir. Knew this girl from Songnam, sir. Korean. Prettiest little girl you ever saw. But she wasn'tâ€| wasn'tâ€| normal, sir. Wouldn't go out with me - 'cause she said she was a leshâ€| a lezâ€| aâ€|"

The private stopped, confused. He reoriented himself, opened his mouth: "â€|anyway, sir. She liked _girls. _Wouldn't take money, gifts, nothin'. Her mother didn't approve, neither. Tried to help me, but this girlâ€| she liked _dames. _Damn. Dames."

Kramer felt his temper getting the best of him, but he controlled it for a moment, looked around. The Master Chief was standing to the side, stoic as always. Corporal Hook had a disgusted look on her face, and Dari evidently just didn't get it.

"And what does _that _mean, Private?"

Briggs clicked his heels together, stuttered, and finally managed to get out, "It means I'm drunk. Sir."

Suddenly, Briggs was lying on his back, smashed to the floor, blood covering the front of his face. Kramer was standing over him, his fist speckled with the Private's blood. The Sergeant was screaming, "Briggs, if you _ever _do anything that half-assed, that _irresponsible _again, I swear I will _personally _put a bullet in your brain and save the Flood the trouble!"

And with that, Kramer turned away, wiped blood on his pants. "Pack up," he snarled to Dari and Hook. "We're moving out."

Eugene Roe moved in to Briggs, already preparing a bandage for the Marine's face. The Master Chief squatted next to the medic as he

examined Briggs' nose.

"I take it this has happened before?" the Spartan asked quietly.

Roe nodded, his face wrinkled by stress. "Sure has. Sonny-boy here can be a nice kid, but he's got a taste for booze."

As Corporal Hook walked by, arms full of gear, she added, "The sergeant's had some run-ins, too."

The Chief sighed. He had never had to deal with this amongst his Spartans before, and it troubled him - much as everything else seemed to, these days. "Define 'run-ins,'" he requested, keeping any readable emotion carefully out of his voice.

Roe looked up, frowned. "Story floats around that once, out on Athena Station, he had some trouble with drinking in his unit. Put out a blanket order: no more booze."

The Chief raised a brow behind his helmet. Seemed reasonable.

"Then, rumor has it, one day a drunken non-com walked up to him, gave him some lip about the drunk thing. They say Sarge shot him right between the eyes with his M6C. And he never had any trouble with drinking after that."

The Chief held his sardonic expression, though no one could see it. Rising wordlessly, he turned and began to help Corporal Hook load their Warthog with supplies. Damn.

* * *

> <p>Maximus nodded approvingly at the story. Certainly the way he would have handled it, though shooting the insolent one in the head seemed almost too restrained.<p>

Huffing, he slung the large crate in his arms into the trailer hitched to the Warthog and examined the results. They struck him as rather ironically amusing: his own packing job was neat and controlled, while the humans' seemed rather messy to him: straps not tightened well, boxes haphazardly shoved into corners. Brutes had reputations for being mangy, slovenly drunks. Nearby, a slovenly drunk of a human was barely coming back to consciousness.

He silently thanked the human - if there weren't small problems like these to distract them, they might spend more time wondering why in the name of the Divines they had taken their closest enemy into their bosom.

Maximus himself was not entirely sure what he thought of the humans. Dari seemed to have grown somewhat attached to the female, which was enough to mean that Maximus trusted her. Dari had excellent instincts.

Maximus himself found the human sergeant an interesting case study of humanity. The human obviously had some kind of baggage that he was carrying - which was something one would expect from an elite, not someone as uncouth as a human.

The Demon, too, he found intriguing. For all the fear the Covenant

gave him, Maximus' powers of observation easily told him that the green-armored thing was not the emotionless creature he had been made out to be.

Briggs seemed much like the archetypical human: loud, dirty, and loutish. But then, the sangheili seemed to think of the brutes in the same way.

The medic, Row, was a quiet one. He smiled often and spoke little. Maximus generally dismissed his presence as he would a newborn jiralhanae cub.

_That, _of course, made him think of his lone grandchild, a young cub by the name of Domian back home on Doisac. The little one had been born a mere ten cycles ago, yet already he was learning the Prophets' lies, learning to hate the humans, the sangheili, learning to hate.

Maximus forced the thought aside. His own mate believed the Prophets' blasphemies, as did all his kind. He quietly promised himself that if he survived this and was allowed to return, he would devote his time to undoing the damage the Prophets had done to his people. For that, he had the humans to thank.

And in ways such as these, he owed the humans much. They had opened his eyes to the lies of the Prophets and the truth of the Divines - what the humans called 'Forerunners.' And as many of their kind as he had slainâ€|

â€|but that was something to ponder at another time.

* * *

>Dari, too, was doing his own assessment of the humans. But unlike Maximus, he was not a philosophical creature. He was very practical. In his mind, the list looked something like this:<p><p>

_Jayna and Maximus - good. _

_Everything else - scary. _

Briggs frightened him with his constant homicidal overtones. The Demon's solid silence unnerved him. Kraymer's loud, rough voice put him in a terror generally reserved for sangheili Zealots. 'Ulee Dakol was an elite, and that was enough.

Really. It was all too much for one unggoy to take in at once. The squat little alien pushed the last crate into the trailer and wheezed for another breath. Byproducts of methane hissed from his breather. He wondered what his matron would have said about this, then decided that it was better not to think about it.

Life really was so unfair.

11. L'Art d'Introspection

A/N: A Merry Christmas to you all - hope it was lovely. Happy Boxing Day to you Aussies out there. Happy Hannukah to the Jews, and a good Feast to those of you who claim Islam. _Salaam. _

This chapter definitely has a more spiritual feel - I think the season is getting to me. If it's too much, say so. ;-)

And I have completely flipped the bird to slip-space travel times for plot convenience. Nyah.

_

* * *

>Chapter 11: L'Art d'Introspection **

_

* * *

>The camp was quiet, covered by the velvet darkness of artificial night. A soft breeze stirred the brush that ringed the clearing. The remains of a fire burned low, glowing embers sending waves of warmth to the sleepers that ringed it. All were silent and asleep, even the Chief. He lay on his back, hands folded on his chest, helmet off, relying on his armor to keep him warm through the night.<p><p>

Cortana watched him from the visor of his helmet, which sat nearby, close enough at hand that he could slip it on should combat beckon. She sat on the edge, legs dangling, arms crossed over her chest.

Mendicant Bias was patrolling the perimeter only as a sleepless AI could. She could see his soft green light flitting to and fro amongst the trees like a phantom.

Deep in her heart, Cortana distrusted the Forerunner intelligence. He was so different from the Monitors - so much more intelligent, calculating. Guilty Spark had a certain level of frivolity to him: the way he constantly whistled that inane tune, his exclamations proclaiming his wisdom, his blind, peppy optimism. Mendicant was none of these things.

Even Bias' flight patterns were different from Spark's. The AI always took a straight and true path, completely lacking the capering lurches that Spark seemed to indulge in. She shivered - something she never would have done before... rampancy.

Her body was something she was only becoming more aware of as time went on and she focused more and more upon herself, the way she felt. It was a new experience, a new, terrifying set of feelings that coursed through her. For one, modesty had exploded onto the scene - a horrific realization that she was naked. Previously, 'nakedness' had been associated with her transistors, her wiring being exposed, and that was not a huge taboo. But every time she used her avatar, she had a horrible sense of exposure, and she understood neither why nor how she felt as she did.

The gamut of human emotions - joy, rage, suspicion, hatred, sorrow, pleasure, love - had descended upon her, and she hardly knew how to deal with them except to shut down and try to take them one at a time. They were not computer impulses - she could not control, turn

off, adjust her feelings as she saw fit.

It was a frightening, disorienting experience that left her feeling... helpless.

Yet, as her gaze fell again upon John's sleeping face, she felt that faint spark in her chest again, like hot magma swelling within her, that told her that he loves you, whether he knows it or not, and he will protect you. He will die to protect you. _

Then: God... if You're out there, and You listen to AIs... don't let that happen. _

—

* * *

>John was not asleep.<p><p>

He lay there, eyes closed, breathing easily, but his mind was very busy.

He could sense Cortana sitting on the visor of his helmet, almost as if he'd seen her before he lay down. He could also sense her pain and confusion, and that rampancy was taking a harder toll on her than she would tell him.

They hadn't spoken about anything outside of procedure in the last two days, which left him feeling detached, loosed from her - just as lost and alone as he'd felt back on Earth. Going through the motions like the mindless robot everyone seemed to think he was.

_ "Sir! You are a walking tank, sir!" _

_ But that's not the only thing I am. _

The world expected the Spartan to be a simple creature: a born-and-bred killer whose greatest joy was eviscerating split-jawed aliens with 7.62 mm hollow-point bullets. But humans are not meant to exist only on such primitive impulses. No matter how much ONI tried to beat it out of him, John-117 was still a human being - capable of weakness and vulnerability just as much as strength and competence.

Unable to stand the ache in his gut, he rolled over and sat up. Cortana jerked at his sudden movement, drew her legs up as if to cover herself. Her eyes were wide, face raw with a level of emotion that the Spartan had never seen before.

"Sorry to scare you," he said, offering an encouraging look - at least, one he hoped was encouraging.

Cortana responded with a wan smile. "No harm," she replied. "I thought you were asleep."

John shrugged. "Can't. Thinking too hard."

"About what?" the AI wanted to know.

The Spartan cocked an eyebrow, passed his friend a sheepish look.

"Well." How to say it? "I was... thinking of you, actually."

That made a flicker of amusement cross Cortana's face. "Oh?"

"We haven't talked about... what happened on High Charity," the Chief began lamely.

"Which is another way of saying you worry too much," Cortana replied, weariness creeping into her voice.

"Should I be worried?" John asked pointedly.

Cortana sighed. She should have known that it would come to this. And really, she should have told him sooner. Guilt made its presence known on her face. "You know, you should," she answered bitterly. "I've... there's something I haven't been telling you."

John arced an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Cortana lay her head down on her knees, forced herself to look away from him, his eyes glimmering in the firelight. "When I was in High Charity, the Gravemind... introduced a malignant virus into my system."

The Spartan's attention sharply focused. He stiffened, quickly realizing what this meant. "What type of virus?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Cortana admitted. "It's... strong. Too strong for me to eradicate, especially in this state. I think it was intended to wipe out my Zero Sector."

"To take you," the Chief interpreted grimly, remembering the Flood intelligence's -

- voice but an amalgam of others' voices torn by agony and wrenched into the formation of words... creeping malevolence wrapped in a being who truly believed that he was God Incarnate -

"Yes," Cortana replied, voice firm, final.

The Chief shook his head, sighed again. He'd been doing that so often lately - he felt something that he simply couldn't pin down. He felt... drained, sick, disgusted.

Cortana had been compromised: this virus would impair her operations and potentially turn her into an agent of the Flood. Distantly, he felt the military man in him saying that he needed to activate the failsafes, erase her immediately, never jeopardize the mission, the mission ahead of everything... -

No. -

Never. -

"John?"

The Spartan looked up. The AI was looking at him, eyes filled with... longing. "Yes?"

"I... thanks."

The Spartan knew he was a transparent man without the helmet. She knew what he'd been thinking, and she knew the conclusion he'd come to. It brought a small curve to his lips - the first smile he'd indulged in since... since forever. Something warmed in his chest, and the smile grew wider. "You're welcome."

The urge to say something more began to weigh on him, and he knew what the words were - this time. They wanted to come - but as he looked at her sitting there, small and frightened, he reminded himself for the fiftieth time you're crazy, Spartan. Even if she... did... how the hell would that work?

How the hell does any of this work?

—

* * *

>The UNSC Montana was a very special ship. One of the last Prowler-class deep-space vessels built at the famed 'SkunkWorks' Lockheed-Martin shipyards, it was built for the hunt, built to be a scout, a harbinger for the huge, hulking dreadnoughts that searched and destroyed humanity's foes.

It had streaked across the galaxy, searching for the last, greatest enemy to the UNSC, and now, it had finally arrived.

The Ark spun lazily below them, aglow with its own light. Jack Bauer stared out the viewshield and folded his arms. He had seen the images of the Halos, and later of the Ark, but seeing it up close... was different.

Rear Admiral Goldstein stood behind him, issuing orders to the crew in a low tone, lost in his own mental gyrations.

Jack considered his mission again, ran over the briefings in his mind in the greatest detail. The AI was rampant, potentially murderous, like a Havoc warhead primed to explode. John-117 was likely not going to let the AI go without a fight, so he had to go, too. Which went against Jack's personal involvement in the Spartan-II program.

Well. He had to start somewhere, and what better place to start than with John-117 and the AI they called Cortana?

The trick was finding them.

Only one way to start.

Turning, he caught Goldstein's attention. "Prepare a single pod for a hard-drop. And start the scanners. Look for active IFF tags," he ordered, voice rough from disuse.

Goldstein looked at him incredulously. Officially, the mission was to retrieve the AI, Cortana, but both he and Bauer knew that in reality, it would come down to killing Spartan-117 and forcefully taking back the AI. Yet Bauer wanted a single pod? "You'll be going in to scout...?" he asked hopefully.

Jack turned, one eyebrow arced. "No. I'll be going in to speak

directly with the Master Chief."

Dumb shit's going to get himself killed, _Goldstein thought derisively. And, of course, I will get blamed for it somehow. Keeping his annoyance from his face, he pushed a tone of condescension into his voice and said, "You realize that if you go in alone, we can't help you from here."

Jack kept his face rigid, unmoving, lips just short of a scowl. "I know."

Goldstein sighed, covered his ass: "If a hostile moves to take you out... you know you're on your own."

Son of a bitch, _Jack thought, annoyed. You think I'm a glory hound, don't you? I know."

Goldstein nodded evenly, played the innocent. Bauer did not outrank him, but the Admiral was loath to cross a spook, and thus, cross ONI. He gave an internal shrug, tried to keep too much deference from making itself obvious on his face.

"All right. I'll... I'll have it prepped."

* * *

><p>Corporal Hook slumped down and let her helmet fall to the earth beside her. Across from her Maximus was lovingly polishing the blades of a lone spiker that they'd found aboard the Dawn.

"Nice mess we're in, isn't it?" she muttered in the brute's general direction.

Maximus looked up and let fall the dirty rag in his hand. He examined her tired face for a moment, his dark eyes peering through the silvered fur that ringed them. "But you have the look one who has been in many places such as this," he replied, his tone speaking as if this were an obvious fact - one that he was reminding her of.

Jana cocked an eyebrow. "By which you mean...?"

The old Jiralhanae laid the spiker in his furry lap; it was actions like those that continually reminded Jana that without his power armor, the brute was naked. Ignoring her blushing look - mostly because he did not know what it meant - Maximus explained: "The look of one who's been tested is universal."

The Corporal responded with a sarcastic grin. "Yep. You aliens and us humans. We're so alike."

"You would be surprised," Maximus answered. His large, furred paws were dexterously manipulating some crude controls on the pistol grip of the spiker.

Jana expected an explanation, but when he did not continue, her curiosity pricked her. "Like what?"

Maximus nodded, chuckled. "We are both soldiers, are we not? We both carry the scars of war. And as races - do we all not love, hate,

forgive, bicker, argue?"

"Some more than others," was Hook's sardonic reply.

"No doubt," Maximus came back equably. "...and that sounds like the voice of experience."

"You - a brute - asking me? About my life?" Jana asked incredulously, raising her eyebrows. Maximus noted that they seemed remarkably well-groomed for a soldier's.

"Why not?"

Jana shrugged, looked away, mystified. "Yeah... why not? Why not tell my life story to a brute?"

Maximus mimicked her shrug, baring his fangs in a show of amusement. "What better do we have to do here?"

Jana looked back, the look in her eyes empty and distant. "Well. I'm twenty-four earth years old. Joined the ODSTs - part of the human army - when I was twenty-two. Distinguished myself on Macedon Station back on Earth, and got promoted to Lance Corporal. And here I am now."

"What were you before you were a warrior?" Maximus wanted to know, deciding to ignore the fact that he understood approximately half of that.

"A fool," Jana responded bitterly, and said nothing more.

Maximus grunted, once again nonplussed. "What happened?" he asked gently.

Jana gave a harsh laugh. "Not even sure why I'm telling you this," she said huskily. "I never thought I'd be psychoanalyzed by a brute."

She took a moment to collect herself; Maximus allowed it, realizing that he had begun to tread upon ground that was still scorched by unknown fires.

Jana finally looked up, obviously trying to keep back tears. She smiled weakly. "I fell for a guy in the Marines named Terence. I was eighteen. He said he really loved me, wanted to marry me. Promised he would, too, when he got back from Basic. Training, that is."

"...and he failed to make good on his promise," Maximus finished.

"Worse," Jana growled. "He had some little army slut on his arm. He was... completely different from the man I knew."

Maximus repressed a growl, but kept his face an impassive mask. He had done some independent study of humanity in order to better understand them. This was an age-old story among them, apparently. Among brutes, the matter wouldn't have been a problem; the returning warrior would simply have kept both women. But humans seemed to place some kind of importance upon monogamy. It had a certain romantic appeal to Maximus; he had only one mate, himself.

But Jana evidently wasn't finished. "I had a friend..." she began, steadying her voice. "...his name was Matthew. Matt, for short." She sighed. "He was great to me after Terence..."

Maximus nodded sympathetically, letting her take her time. She went on, haltingly, the memory washing into her eyes, a window into a thunderstorm.

Her mind slowly plodded back onto territory that she would rather have not walked but that the brute before her seemed to draw out, in his own demure, understated way.

"Matt literally saved my life. I was suicidal for a long time afterward... and I was cruel to him. He'd visit me at work, bring me food, listen while I cried and screamed, then he'd just quietly say exactly what I needed to do." She looked up, and tears were in her eyes.

"He had... a disease... that made his bones weak. Vrolik's syndrome. And one night, we were sitting in his car, and he was telling me that 'hanging onto Terence' was killing me. And I started hitting him. I... broke both of his collarbones."

Maximus winced. These cultural elements she referred to were utterly foreign to him, but the guilt and the shame was universal. "I see..." he murmured.

"Oh, but it gets worse," she intoned caustically. "Instead of helping, I said a polite goodnight, got up out of the car, and - and - and I left him there."

Maximus watched her face as she worked to keep back tears, and decided to let it alone for now. Some things... simply took time.

* * *

><p>The armor looked good, sitting there in the wall mount, just waiting for him.

Jack had never gotten to wear the Mjolnir Mark V armor that his fellow Spartans had received. But he'd been told that it was like holding a delicate goblet in your hand: a sense of control, and of fearful power - knowing that a single wrong move could crush the fragile glass into a thousand shards.

The armor looked _frightening, _sitting there in the wall mount, just waiting for him.

An amazing dichotomy. One that he forced himself to ignore.

Turning, he examined his personal weapons cache. An M5C 2x2-scoped pistol awaited him: a special holdout that ONI had kept aside in the event that such a high-powered weapon would be needed. Clipped into a wall mount was a pair of needlers: the weapon ONI had identified as most capable of killing John-117. An S2-AM sniper rifle flanked

And there, in the wall rack, backlit by hundreds of white, gleaming diodes, was _the armor. _

Mjolnir Mark VI, permutation 9.01.03: Counter-Tactical Powered Assault/Recon Armor - shipped from the Misriah Armory to the Songnam testing grounds, then up into orbit to the Montana. He knew the specs by heart: the basic Mjolnir armor system with hundreds of minor improvements. The chestplate employed specialized heat-repellant ceramic anti-projectile ablative plating with an internal layer of magnetized nanite weave designed to partially repel plasma in the event of an exoskeletal breach. The frontal plates were lamed, standing at odd angles, capable of deflecting bullets fired from forward positions. The armor was matte military green via a thick coat of radar absorbent iron ferrite paint that absorbed the H-FR (high-frequency radar) used by motion trackers.

The servomotors that powered the armor had been upgraded by Asriel Biomechanical Solutions, off of Earth itself. They were now capable of delivering blows with a concentrated force of nearly 600 fps - easily enough to crush bones and pulp flesh. The drivers that powered the leg segments of the armor had been fitted with the equivalent of a perpetual motion generator - using the energy Jack would expend while running to increase his top speed. He would now be capable of sprinting at close to sixty miles an hour for short bursts.

The helmet utilized the standard design, but widened the visor to increase the peripheral, more reminiscent of the Mjolnir Mark V. It contained all requisite systems: onboard cameras, full HUD, gamma filtration, heat/night/EMP vision modes, holocam projector, and targeting software. The technicians at Misriah had also added two little gems: a wide-band communications decryption-capable onboard computer and the human edition of active camouflage. They'd offered him an AI, but Jack wasn't very fond of that idea.

Back on Earth, his hands and his eyes had always served him well enough to protect him. It was the lone failing of the Spartan program, he thought: the tendency of ONI to rely on technology, which was thus transferred to the Spartans. Yet at the same time, he was eager to wear this armor. It was unique to him, specially designed for a task such as this.

He quietly admitted to himself that he was torn - this, as he pulled on his rubber undersuit. On the one hand, he wished that he could have done his part in the war with the Covenant, but he could now see that if he'd been involved in that, he might not be serving humanity today in this way.

And he was torn on a much deeper level.

While he and John-117 had never been close, he knew and respected the deeds of the Master Chief. And he knew that he and John were the last Spartans alive. He did not want the title of 'Last Spartan' - much as he did not want to engage in a conflict with 117. Yet at the same time...

...everything else in his life depended on the success of this mission.

The choice was an easy one, but that didn't mean that he liked it.

And now, here he was, about to go down to talk to the Chief himself instead of just overpowering him with Skyhawk jumpjets and a few

platoons of ODSTs because his damn sense of honor wouldn't let him finish the job cleanly. Always have to make it complicated, don't you? _

The technicians helped him get into the chestplate, closing the EV seals, locking him into the suit. As they began working to squeeze the pauldrons and vambraces onto his arms, he stared into the reflective golden visor of the helmet, and wondered why he always was chosen for the impossible. _

* * *

>John had an odd feeling that MCPO Mendez would have killed him if he could have seen this. Dr. Halsey had encouraged this when he was going through training, but Mendez always said that he should spend more time studying war than... that.

_John paused for a moment and looked around at the opulent surroundings. The shining gold and cut-glass chandelier in the center of the room was jarring to his senses, almost as if his eyes simply couldn't take in the sight of solid gold. In some ways, he wanted to be back outside in the trenches of Masyaf II, fighting alongside Blue Team. _

_But the UNSC hierarchy here wanted a word with him, so here he sat in his armor, helmet tucked under his arm, waiting in a huge reception room on the main floor of the Dar al-Harb, as it was locally called. 'House of War.' He'd been sitting for a while... must be what had driven him to this. _

_Sitting behind an old grand piano and... wanting to play. _

_The piano was aged and out of tune, the ivory keys yellowed and cracked with age. The Spartan took a guilty look around to make sure no one was looking. He set his helmet atop the closed lid of the instrument and carefully popped the EV seals on his gloves, slipping them off to reveal the fingerless rubber underneath. _

_He brushed the keys nervously, wondered - _will I remember how? _- then pushed it aside and... _

_...he remembered. _

_Somehow, his fingers began to coax a gentle, sweeping melody from the worn strings, a swelling press of minor key notes that quietly throbbed in the high-ceilinged chamber. It awakened something in his cold heart, something that he hadn't felt since he was twelve years old, playing this same song in a dingy basement during a night exercise on Reach... waiting for morning... waiting for dawn.

_Waiting for light. _

_Suddenly, a blue glow washed over the keys, and he instinctively looked up. Cortana was standing on the visor of his helmet, a pleasantly surprised look on her face. "You play piano," she exclaimed quietly, making John stop in mid-phrase, the melody abruptly ending. _

_John smiled sheepishly. "Not the most public part of my life."

-

_Cortana sat down, gave him a look that made a soft rush of adrenaline swell in his chest, shortening his breath. "What did you stop for?" _

_The Spartan shrugged, felt strangely out of place, tried to make light: "You interrupted me." _

_ "Right," Cortana replied evenly, shooting him a grin. "You should play more often." _

_ "Don't usually get a chance," the Chief replied, turning his gaze down to the keys resting beneath his fingers. "Or the urge."

-

_ "Would you do it more often if I asked?" Cortana said, a mischievous glint in her eye and a smirk on her lips. _

_ To his own surprise, the Chief instantly replied, "Sure."

-

_ Cortana arced an eyebrow at him, winked. "Away, Maestro." _

The Spartan sighed, suddenly wishing that he had a piano under his fingertips, that he could dance his rough, calloused fingertips over the keys - classical music like Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, and Bing Crosby, or even archaic: Bach, Chopin, Mendelssohn.

His gaze fell on his helmet, sitting next to him as he poked at the ashes of the fire, waiting for the rest of the camp to awaken.

Mendicant Bias was still making his tireless rounds in the early half-light. And the Chief knew that Cortana was asleep - he'd checked.

His mind could not shake a word that had plagued him since his momentous re-entry to the Ark. _Love. _

And one question tormented him, wrestling in his head like tangled, twisted bars of steel whipped by impossible forces. What is love?

He knew all the philosophical musings of all the most famed philosophers and thinkers of the 1st through the 24th centuries: Ptolemy, Christopher Hitchens, Shien Seguro - none of them, he felt, had the true answer. Something had caused him to fall in love with this AI - a phenomenon that he was certain had never happened before. He didn't know even the slightest what to do with this feeling, what it meant, what was intended in its inclusion in humanity.

Frustrated, he tossed a handful of wood onto the fire and started to break open an MRE. _Why did this happen now, and why in the hell does it have to be such a pain in the ass? _

He knew about marriage, 'romance,' all the mechanics, and had believed that he had a fair understanding of it. But now, confronted with it and all the chaos that it wreaked upon his mind, he realized just how truly inadequate it was. A few disjointed thoughts came

together for a moment, something from St. Paul...

...damn it. What was that? _

_ "Love is..." ...what? _

He glanced up. Sergeant Kramer had collected some books from the crew's quarters - he had them in a small box on the trailer. Rising, the Chief spared a glance for Mendicant Bias, then strode over and quickly located the plasteel container. He dug through several contemporary titles -

- there. A cracked leather binder presented itself to him: The Holy Bible - New King James Version, c. 1998. _

He quickly flipped through the yellowed onion-skin paper to the Letters of St. Paul. A page tore slightly under his rubber-clad fingers and he sighed. A book like this was valuable; Christianity had mostly died out in the last two centuries, save on Earth, where it remained the dominant religion. But Bibles were scarce, particularly ones such as this. This book was a reprint of a manuscript that was six hundred years old - something quite remarkable.

_There it is. _

The First Letter to the Corinthians gave up for him the passage he sought in the holy book. A quick scan took his eyes to the thirteenth sector, the fourth passage: Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not proud; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. _

Love never fails. _

The words were so foreign, so out of his understanding, that they fell from his lips in a whisper of wonder: ...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And never fails."

Was that it?

Was that what he found growing in himself?

Was that what he wanted?

More importantly - was it what she needed?

And, as he closed the book and gently tucked it into its place in the crate, he did not hear the distant roar of an HEV pod entering the atmosphere and plummeting to the earth a mere three kilometers away.

For the first time in his life, the Master Chief was completely and hopelessly distracted.

* * *

><p>Dari the grunt had absently wandered away from the camp at an

early hour, leaving the others sleeping in a loose circle about the campfire, leaving the Holy Oracle to patrol the grounds.<p>

This was how he found himself flat on his face underneath a rotted log, covered in mud, cold, terrified, and generally certain that he was about to die. Again.

He recognized the huge metal beast that had descended through the air, roaring like an angry Sangheili zealot - the very thought made him cringe - and smashing into the ground with enough force to completely decimate several trees and bury itself halfway in the mud.

The underside of the metal was glowing an angry orange. Nothing had exploded out of the pod yet - no gun-toting humans, blood-crazed brutes, homicidal kig-yar lusting after grunt flesh...

- the door of the pod moved.

It creased just a bit near the top, as if whatever was inside was trapped, trying to get out. This enheartened the grunt somewhat, and he rolled out of his hiding place. Evidently whatever it was, it could be just as susceptible to bad luck as a grunt.

This was about the time that the door of the pod suddenly slammed wide open, smashing a divot in the mud and revealing the most horrifying thing Dari had ever seen.

Another Demon.

His semi-rational mind fled him, and he turned and raced back into the woods toward the camp as fast as his stubby legs would carry him.

_Why _did it always happen to _him? _

_A/N: Jack's armor is my own design. I haven't really war-gamed it much, but I'm fairly certain it's all workable. _

12. Des Souris et Hommes

A/N: Totally redid this chapter to accomodate some plot changes that I've made. It's crucial that you read this in order to understand the next chapter.

* * *

><p>Chapter 12: ...Des Souris et Hommes**

* * *

><p>"Whoa, whoa, calm down!" Kramer said loudly, trying to be heard over Dari's frantic chittering. The unggoy had been chanting, "Very bad thing!" for the last few minutes, which had induced a splitting headache in Ulee 'Dakol and was once again filling Private Briggs' head with thoughts of grunt homicide.<p>

Exasperated, the sergeant was about to resort to beating the grunt over the head until it quieted, when Maximus suddenly stepped forward

and dropped to one huge, furry knee. Two monstrous hands reached out and grabbed Dari by the shoulders, stopping the little unggoy short. "Dari."

The grunt reacted as if he'd been slapped. He turned, finally caught his wits, and exclaimed, "Big Demon come from the sky!"

The Master Chief slipped to the front. "Wait, a 'demon?'"

The grunt nodded, waving his stubby arms. "Big, tall Demon with _guns!_" he cried distressingly, as if the guns were the worst part.

The Chief turned, his gaze meeting that of Sergeant Kramer. "You thinkâ€¢?" the sergeant asked, hope rising in his voice.

"No," the Chief replied darkly.

Somehow, some way, the Master Chief just _knew. _

Suddenly, the Spartan felt, rather than saw, a presence to his left, just behind the treeline. He studiously ignored it, but quietly murmured, "I'm not sure what's about to happen, but be ready for anything."

Kramer's eyes filled with suspicion, but caught the Spartan's hint and turned. "Well, if it's a rescue party, we'll need to be ready for pick up. Get together your gear and fire up the Warthog," he ordered loudly. "We'll go check it out."

The Chief watched as the others began to disperse, but he caught Ulee 'Dakol's attention with a subtle nod. The elite cautiously drew close, and the Chief cocked his head and whispered, "Something is moving on the treeline, but I can't get it on my motion tracker. Be ready."

The Sangheili nodded slowly, understanding. "By your word."

Ulee began to move away, but the Chief caught his arm and added, "Warn Maximus."

That taken care of, the Chief turned his attention to his motion tracker and carefully searched it for a telltale red blip. Cool blue met his gaze, so he quickly dialed it up to forty meters, then fifty, sixty, and finally, maximum range of seventy.

Nothing.

"Cortana," he muttered in the interest of stealth.

"Yes?" she asked, sounding as if she'd just awoken. It was obvious that she hadn't been listening; she was brooding again.

The Chief brushed it off in the interest of handling the current crisis: "Something's approaching our position at my nine o'clock, but I can't get a fix on the motion tracker."

Cortana stirred gently in his head, roused. She took a moment to bring something online, then sounded surprised: "You're right. Tracker's got nothing. Are you sure that there's someone

there?"

Right on cue, John felt an unfamiliar presence behind him, and he whirled with impossible speed, pistol flew into his grip, reticule in his HUD, pointed right at the head of -

- a Spartan.

That Spartan reached for his hip, drew his own pistol - an M5C - pointing it at John's face.

"Stand down," the Master Chief ordered fiercely, shouting. "Stand down, Spartan!"

"Lower your weapon!" Jack roared simultaneously. "I am not hostile!" Chaos in Fireteam Zulu exploded as the situation escalated, tight lines forming around his eyes, narrowing, saw the finger on the trigger slowly begin to squeeze, not what I was hoping for -

Just then, the double-clunk of a shotgun being full-cocked broke the noise. "I believe you were ordered to stand down," came the subtly threatening voice of Maximus the brute.

Jack half-turned, saw the huge, silverback brute standing too close for comfort, shotgun leveled in one paw, looking tiny amidst the mass of fur and muscle. His temper flared, and a needler lunged from his leg plate to a magnetic panel in his gauntlet, leveled right in the brute's face.

The snap-hiss of a plasma sword caught his attention. Ulee 'Dakol suddenly strode into view, his gait still somewhat lopsided from his wound, but tall, strong, and deadly, plasma sword sizzling in his hand. The twin-tipped blade rose through the air until it bracketed the Spartan's helmet between its prongs.

Jack muttered something low under his breath as his three assailants eyed him with great care. Sighing, he slowly raised both the pistol and the needler until they were pointed at the sky, and repeated again, "I am not hostile. I've been sent by the UNSC to search for the Master Chief."

John wasn't buying it right off the bat: "Drop your weapons, then."

Jack did so without hesitation, realizing that this situation was already doomed, and that all he could do was play it to the end.

The Chief eyed the two weapons that lay at Jack's feet for a second, then nodded to his two companions. 'Dakol quickly withdrew his blade and stowed it on his hip without question, but Maximus holstered his shotgun hesitantly.

"You've been looking for me, you found me," the Chief said, trying to keep hostility out of his voice. There was always the chance that he was wrong. "What's your designation, Spartan?"

"Jack-004. Sir," Jack replied quickly. "It's been a while, John," he added as he popped off his helmet. A sign of nonaggression. Even the brute will understand that.

"Jack?" the Chief exclaimed, openly surprised as he moved to remove his own helmet. "You were working for IID after the Spartan-II program. What changed?"

* * *

><p>"There were a few survivors."

_John did his best to keep his face from twisting into a pained scowl. "Who?" _

_Mendez scanned the list, searched for the handful of names that were not marked with asterisks. "Uhâ€| Fhajad, Beth, Anatoly, Jack -"

-

"_Jack made it?" John asked uncertainly. "I had heard otherwise."

-

_Mendez shook his head sadly. "Says here he's alive and wellâ€| justâ€| blind." _

_The Master Chief lowered his head and sat down heavily. Mendez moved to sit across from him, holding the ream of paper in his thick hands. "He knew what he was getting into," Mendez said, voice low, dark brows beetling. _

_John nodded, confirming, but deep within, he somehow feltâ€| responsible. Jack was the best 'lone wolf' of the Spartans - the one who'd always been the most capable of running off to handle something himself while the rest of his team focused on another objective, yet he was an excellent leader. He and John had never been as close as the Chief was with Blue Team, but nevertheless, Jack was a Spartan.

-

_He would be greatly missed. _

* * *

><p>"Technology did," Jack replied, a measure of sarcasm in his voice.<p>

John accepted the answer, felt awkward. This was a moment that called for diplomacy, something that was not his forte and never had been. He looked toward Sergeant Kramer, was about to say something when Cortana said in his comm, "Let me handle this."

The Chief nodded, kept relief away from his face. He'd almost forgotten that she was here: it showed just how utterly absent she'd been since their days on the Ark.

He held his helmet in front of him just as her avatar appeared, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Jack-004, hmm?" she said, and the distinct tinge of quiet anger was in her voice. "Let's seeâ€| hired by the East African Protectorate Internal Investigation Division after your expulsion from the Spartan-II program. You went blind during the procedure, had to have your retinas replaced with implants."

Jack was taken aback by Cortana's sudden appearance, but he kept his

cool, as always: "With all due respect, ma'am, I am here to speak with the Master Chief."

Cortana ignored him. "What no one really seems to know is that you were recruited by ONI Section Zero during the ass-end of the Rebellion, worked for them putting down rebel cells."

Jack kept his face neutral; this information confirmed that she was terribly dangerous. If she had breached ONI's network, then she was fully capable of disseminating that information to anyone.

—

Cortana's voice seemed to be rising in pitch, in anger. "But you quit, right in the middle of the war with the Covenant, a year before Reach. And do you want to tell us why?" she growled, her face twisting into a scowl.

Jack regarded her calmly. "That's not what I'm here for, ma'am."

Cortana glanced over her shoulder at the Master Chief. "You remember Gray Team, John?"

The Spartan nodded slowly. "James, Lamar, Muhammad, and Alyssa. Called on a classified mission outside of UNSC space."

Cortana gave him a sharp nod as Jack's rock hard visage wavered slightly.

"They went to the sangheili homeworld, Sangheilios. HAVOK-nuked the elites' equivalent of HIGHCOM. It was supposed to be like a test-run of the mission we'd intended to go on before Alpha Halo, John. The mission was a great success, but they came back with some intel that they weren't supposed to find out."

Sergeant Kramer advanced, his face darkening. "Which wasâ€|?"

"It seems that ONI Zero had been conversing with some elements of Covenant leadership, talking about a treaty - a treaty that involved surrendering 60 percent of UNSC space and 20 billion citizens up to the Covenant. Gray Team brought it back and reported to Margaret Parangosky on Earth, not knowing that Parangosky had authorized the talks herself."

John saw where this was going, and as he realized the truth of it written on Jack's face, he felt a cold waste opening up in his gut. "Go on."

"Parangosky insisted that they not tell anyone, but James told her that that wasn't chain of command. He was under orders to report to Lord Hood after her. So you know what happened then? She whistled up a kill-squad from East Africa. They traveled to the Langley barracks, where Gray Team was bunking for the night, and killed them. In their sleep. The leader of the kill squad was Mr. Ex-Spartan Extraordinaire, Jack-004. Special Agent Jack Bauer."

Jack lowered his head, knowing he couldn't argue the truth of it, wishing to get out, _what the hell was he thinking in coming hereâ€|?

—

* * *

><p>He seemed more insistent tonight than ever before; he fiercely pressed his lips against hers. Terri wasn't objecting, but it meant something was wrong. He was always in control, always, and thisâ€| something was wrong.

_His lips moved away from her own to her neck, sending warm thrills down her spine as she dug her fingers into his hair, murmured, "Is something bothering you?" _

_Jack tried to burn the images out of his brain as he pulled her closer, pressed her against him by the small of her back. "â€|nothing." _

_The blood on the pillowcase and James serenly smiling in sleep, completely oblivious to the bullet hole in his forehead. _

_As his rough yet tender hands began tugging at her negligee, needy, pleading, Terri pulled back. "Jackâ€| you... you seem half-crazy. Don't tell me nothing's wrong." _

_Jack's eyes brimmed with tears for a second, but he steeled himself: "I _can't _tell you." _

"_Oh, Jackâ€| "Her little hands were suddenly wrapping him in a tender embrace as the faces of his brothers and sister played through his mind, dead, all dead, dead at his own cold order: "_Do it." _But Terriâ€| Terri comforted him, the deep, wet blue of her eyes, that intoxicating gaze just left him empty and washed clean of all the wrongs he'd ever doneâ€| _

â€|_as they lost themselves in one anothers' warmth and began the ferocious, tender dance once again, he wished that he could be cleansed of _this.

* * *

><p>"You bastardâ€|" John growled in spite of himself. He drew himself up to his full height - which was several inches taller than Jack - and manfully resisted the urge to lash out and smash the traitorous Spartan's face in.

"They were my orders," Jack said soullessly. "I had no choice."

"We always have a choice, Jack," John replied. "Now tell me what the hell you're _really _here for."

Jack scowled. He riffled his fingers through his sandy blonde hair and said, "I'm here to warn you, John."

"Ofâ€|?"

"I was sent here to destroy your AI."

The words struck John like a MAC round to the chest. _To destroy Cortanaâ€| why? _

"It's gone rampant, John, whether you know it or not," Jack explained, urgency in his voice. This came from the fact that not

only did he want to persuade the Master Chief, he had noticed the murderous look that had crossed Cortana's face.

"_Rampant?_" Private Briggs whispered to Corporal Hook.

"She's gone _human, _Jack," John shot back fiercely. "Rampancy isn't always as bad as it's been made out to be."

"Are you crazy?" Jack said incredulously. "You've heard about the Marathon incident, haven't you?"

"That was _nothing _like this!" Cortana angrily countered. Her body color was beginning to shift toward red - _Guilty Spark-redâ€|_- and her eyes were narrowed, full of hate.

John made a gentle, calming gesture in Cortana's direction. "So you came to warn me. Then what?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm going to go back to my ship, the _Montana, _and I'm going to give you six hours to make a decision. You can turn it over to me and all of you will be evacuated to safety."

Maximus glared at him. "Even Dari and I, Demon?"

"Even you," Jack assured. "You have my word as a Spartan."

"Some value _that _has," Cortana muttered under her breath.

Jack forced back all the things he wanted to say and kept his mind on his task: "It's a direct order from HIGHCOM, John. They're commanding you to turn it over."

Without hesitation: "Shove it up their asses," the Chief deadpanned. "You can tell them I said that when you pass on another little note to them."

Jack sighed, almost frustrated. "What?"

The Chief scowled. "The Flood is loose on this installation. We're going to kill it."

"The Flood?" Jack breathed. "No."

Cortana laughed harshly. "Oh, but yes! HIGHCOM never thought of _that, _did they? Too busy plotting to kill me. After everything I did for themâ€|"

"We're going to destroy it with the Ark's defenses, a weapon called the _Animus_," the Chief explained further. "And I don't have the time or the patience to deal with you right now."

The ex-Spartan shook his head. "Johnâ€| that makes it even more important that you give up that AI."

John tilted his head. "Why?"

"Imagine what would happen if it got assimilated by the Flood? Captured? Look, just give it to me; we'll go to the _Montana_. It's a Prowler-class ship. It carries a payload of six HAVOK nukes. We will destroy this installation, and thus, the Flood."

Suddenly, Mendicant Bias bobbed to the front. "You will do no such thing," the AI declared softly, dangerously. "Continued threats of such action will find you and your ship added to any latent Sentinels' targeting roster."

Jack chose to ignore this new entry; it was time to do-or-die. Eyeing John carefully, he said, "Think about it, John. You have six hours to give me a response. You can reach me on broad-band FLEETCOM. It's just an AI, John. Just a computer."

The Chief sardonically cocked an eyebrow. "Well. Up yours." He started to turn away, then, pausing, "And her name is Cortana, by the way."

Jack slowly pulled on his helmet. "I'm sorry you feel that way." He paused regretfully, then: "I'llâ€| do what I can to get you out of here alive. I'm sorry."

And with that, he moved away. His outline shimmered, and suddenly, he disappeared, concealed by his active camouflage.

John watched the place where he'd been, a mixture of cold anger and fear in his gut. At his elbow, Ulee 'Dakol huffed angrily and muttered, "One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it offâ€|"

* * *

><p>"What the hell is going on?" Briggs demanded, the moment it was quiet.</p>

"Shut up, Private," Cortana growled. "Everyone, strip the IFF tags from your gear, right now."

"What are you talking about?"

Gene Roe patted Briggs on the shoulder. "She means that that Spartan probably found us with our IFF tags, and if we want to keep him off our backs, it'd be smart to ditch 'em."

"OK, sure, but answer me this," Briggs began again as the others began pulling off their chest protectors to get at the IFF transponders. "What is rampant?"

"When an AI goes nuts," Sergeant Kramer answered sharply. "Now get to it."

While his allies began field-stripping their armor, the Master Chief turned his attention to the AI in his skull. "You all right, Cortana?" he asked quietly, moving away to on side.

"Does it sound like it?" Cortana replied, a harsh, bitter laugh in her voice. "Welcome to Rage, Chief."

* * *

><p>"Well, what are our options?" Sergeant Kramer asked, eyes shifting back and forth uncertainly. "I admit I'm at a loss. I'm willing to hear any ideas you all have."</p>

"It is imperative that we press on to the Animus," Mendicant Bias insisted. "It is a simple matter to add the rogue Reclaimer's vessel to the Sentinels' roster."

"Won't work," Cortana said. "Sentinels hunt by heat. Prowler-class ships are stealth enabled. They use heat sinks to contain heat and radiation emissions. Your Sentinels would be flying blind."

"We've just got to stay on the move, then," Corporal Hook said. "Without our IFF transponders, they'll have to go into full-on search mode. That takes time - time we can use to disappear."

"But Prowlers are designed to hunt," Sergeant Kramer countered. "All we might end up doing is walking into a trap."

The Chief listened to this with a dispassionate posture, but within, he felt a flicker of frustration sparking to life in his chest - almost like a sympathetic resonant harmony to Cortana's current anger. These moments, when decisions were made, are what define battles, wars, futures, life, death. Theseâ€¦

* * *

><p>"â€¦*are the places in which you as Spartans may need to step forward and take control of battlefield situations in the place of indecisive Marines or ODSTs.*"

Mendez eyed the youths sitting attentive at their desks, looking down through the panoramic auditorium at their gray-haired MCPO. A small smile cracked his features, and he began a much-loved monologue: -

"Picture two identical pilots in perfectly identical atmospheric Longsword fighters. Two identical swordsmen wielding identical swords. -

"They close with one another at 30,000 feet above the windswept desert, flying nearly a thousand miles an hour. Now. Each pilot is going to first observe the other. They split in opposite directions, the Gs are almost snapping their necks on the break. And on that break, they begin to visualize a three-dimensional battle - they orient themselves. -

" Now, as they circle around for another run, they've both observed, they have both oriented, now they must decide. And once that decision has been made, the only thing that remains is to act. "

John-117 instantly realized where MCPO Mendez was going with this. Four words: an inelegant but accurate acronym: OODA. Observe, orient, decide. Act.

"Whatever that action is, Spartans, whether it is thrust or parry, it is only in the fourth step - act - that actual, physical combat occurs. And this is what is important." -

The commanding officer leaned forward on his lectern, his eyes just as intense and bright as they were on the field of battle. "Being a good fighter, a skilled warrior, is crucial. Here, we are training

you to be just that. But what you must realize, Spartans, is that there are three mental steps that must precede the physical application of your warrior skill." —

He paused for a moment to let the words sink in, reach their targets in the young soldiers' minds. —

"These mental steps are not as important as physical talent. No, they are far more important than being tall, strong, or an accurate shot. This is a cycle, a loop. Observe, orient, decide. Act." —

* * *

><p>"Act," John muttered under his breath.</p>

Then, he decisively stepped forward through the bickering crowd and stood next to Sergeant Kramer and forced everyone to hear him over the noise: "Jack is going to have other forces with him - probably ODSTs." Sudden silence. "They will begin hunting for us in five-and-a-half hours," the Chief concluded.

"Great, more shit to step in," Briggs growled. "So what do we do?"

Master Chief turned to Mendicant Bias. "Bias, you and Kramer take the Warthog and lead the Marines to the Animus. Take the grunt with you. And... Cortana."

The sudden rush in his head became icy. "What?" —she exclaimed, the sound in her voice speaking of hurt and irrational anger.

The Chief closed his eyes, made sure he kept his shoulders up and back. He would not be talked out of this. "Cortana... Jack's here for you. I won't put you in harm's way." —I can't. —

"You..." Cortana began to sputter. John could almost see the look on her face. The seething look. "You need me to help you. You need me to triangulate the Montana's position, predict where their ODSTs will be dropping in at. You need me."

John-117 sighed deeply - "If only..." —you knew. —

"If only, what?" Cortana demanded. The Chief could almost see her put her hands on her slender hips.

"Nothing," the Chief said dismissively. "You're going with Corporal Hook, in her neural lace. Period. I refuse to see you come to harm... I'm sorry."

No response. Nothing.

The Chief forced himself to continue: "Bias, I want to stay in contact with you, keep track of what the Flood is doing, and stay apprised of your progress." He thought about that for a minute, then added, "Your priority is to make sure that you reach the Animus, but your secondary objective is the defense of Corporal Hook and Cortana."

Briggs scowled. "Wait, what? Why in the hellâ€?!"

"What you command shall be done, Reclaimer," the Forerunner AI confirmed, interrupting Briggs.

The Chief felt guilt creep up into his gut, but the conviction in his heart overruled it. Turning to Maximus, the Chief ordered, "You, 'Dakol, and Private Roe will stay with me. They'll likely begin their search close to here. When they come, we'll be here to slow them down so that the others can get to the Animus."

"What happens then?" Eugene Roe wanted to know.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

* * *

><p>Goldstein had been silent for the last five hours. The only orders he'd issued were to keep a fix on those active UNSC tags. And thenâ€¹ he paced. Back and forth, he walked across the bridge almost nonstop, sipping hot coffee, losing himself in warfare theory.</p>

Bauer had watched this in spurts - on again, off again - as he went about the business of coordinating with the ODST teams that would be hard-dropped as soon as the deadline was up. He didn't bother with carrying around his mobile commlink. He knew that the Chief wasn't thinking about whether or not he should turn Cortana over to Jack. The Spartan down on the Ark's surface was plotting on how to outmaneuver, outgun, and outdo Special Agent Bauer.

_Well. We'll see. _

He checked his chrono - ten minutes until the deadline was up. Might as well get started.

* * *

><p>The Warthog's ICE-injectors roared to life, and the rumble of the hydrogen engine filled the valley with its monotone drone. The Master Chief watched as the Marines scrambled into the rear compartment, Corporal Hook helping Dari up from behind.</p>

Before she entered, she turned, faced the Spartan, helmet under her arm. He was unmoving, but beneath his helmet, his mind was turning over upon itself with a feeling of nausea. Clenched protectively in his right hand was Cortana's data chip, a gentle, humming blue, everything he felt was worth fighting for in the universe.

And he was about to give her away. Again.

Corporal Hook stood there, bewildered, waiting awkwardly, until the Chief slowly took her right hand and opened his own over it. The chip fell, landed lightly in her gloved palm, placid, blue, fragile.

The Corporal could feel the Spartan's eyes as they bored a hole into her through his visor. His voice was low and intense, clipped: "Be careful."

* * *

><p>The IFF tags had held strong all through the scan. They had moved

very little - perhaps a hundred feet from where Jack had confronted them.<p>

_Something's not right, _Bauer thought as he strode through the dimly-lit ejection chamber. To his left and right were several dozen HEV pods, each carefully packed with a Helljumper, ready to plunge into combat from four miles above the surface, into a potentially hot drop zone.

Jack sighed. The situation was wrong - the fact that the IFF tags had not moved very far worried him. He'd seen their Warthog and their plethora of supplies. They could have made a hundred miles in the time he'd given them. Yet there they sat. Yellow. Unmoving.

Shaking his head, he backed into his own HEV and popped his helmet on. Tapping his comm, he checked his signal: "All squads, report."

"_Fireteam Beta reporting, sir." _

"_Fireteam Kappa's ready and able." _

"_Fireteam Alpha, locked and loaded." _

"_Fireteam Delta is green, sir." _

Jack nodded, then switched over to FLEETCOM: "Admiral?"

"I read you, Agent Bauer." _

The ex-Spartan tried to get comfortable in his pod as a tech quickly began sealing the explosive bolts that held the flimsy device shut. "How are the drop zones looking?"

"_Free and clear. I've got Beta, Kappa, and Delta dropping in a triangle around the hot zone. Alpha's going in on top." _

"That's not going to work," Jack intoned darkly. "They're probably waiting for us, or have set up traps on the location of the tags. Change the configuration to a square."

* * *

><p>"I doubt that they would be foolish enough to drop in directly on top of us," Ulee 'Dakol muttered. "And even if they did, the traps surrounding the area would still be viable."<p>

"Then what do we do with the mines in the middle?" John asked.

Maximus chuckled. "It is simple. Change the configuration to a square."

* * *

><p>"This is... this is crazy," Private Briggs muttered to Corporal Hook. "The fricking Master fricking Chief is in love with a damn computer, and our own people are hunting us because of that same damn computer.""

"He's your superior office, Briggs," Hook growled in reply. "And I think he knows what he's doing."

"He's Navy, dammit, not Marines! You heard it yourself; HIGHCOM wants the computer, and they'll chase us across this floating hunk of space waste until they get it!"

"They're wrong," Hook replied simply.

"How do you know?" Briggs replied angrily. "How do you _know _that maybe that other Spartan was telling the truth? For all you know, that AI could be balls-out crazy, ready to blow us all up! And she's spent enough time in the Chief's head; maybe he's crazy too. Huh? How do you know?"

Hook ignored him.

From his spot in the driver's seat, Kramer didn't.

13. De Sparta, Avec l'Amour

A/N: Wow. Feels good to be back. Not sure just how good this chapter is, but it's like diarrhea: you can only hold it in for so long. ;-) The next few are sure to be action-packed, which is always great for a writer at my current stage of mental block.

On that note, my private message receiver (i.e., e-mail) done busted, so apologies to those of you who have tried to get into contact with me during these last few months. So if you want to contact me, then shoot me an e-mail at the following address: david at bronsonfamily dot org, of course, removing the 'at' and 'dot' and replacing them with the appropriate symbols. Ha.

While I'm currently spouting off at the head, I will inform you that I redid chapter 12, and you're going to want to read that so that you can understand this next chapter here; I changed a few things. In addition, I'll be adding scenes to earlier chapters that might also affect your understanding of the story, so read these headers periodically for updates.

By the way, to the anonymous 'reviewer,' your note about 'Ntho 'Sraom is duly noted, and duly ignored for one simple reason: people have these complex things called 'motivations.' 'Sraom may be a human sympathizer, as you've so gleefully shouted, but I wrote his character to be one who somewhat values his own life over that of someone else, which is why he killed the pilot: to guarantee himself a spot in the limited seating of the Warthog. Go back and read it. I promise it'll make sense this time.

(Yes. It's true. I've become a low-tolerance jerk while I was gone.) ;-)

Oh! And High Praise goes to IVIaedhros for being pretty much the coolest person on the planet.

* * *

><p>Chapter 13: De Sparta, Avec l'Amour_

* * *

><p>If there was one thing he hated, it was HEV pods. Jack had only used them once before, but once was enough. The clattering shriek and the intense heat that made his optics flicker and sizzle, the jarring crash of the entry chuteâ€!

â€|and, of course, the tooth-grinding landing.

The bolts on his pod fired, door slammed open, and he lunged out, needlers leveled. Drop zone was clear. All around him, more HEV pods plummeted through the trees to smash into the dirt -

he was staggering, falling face first in the mud as huge chunks of metal peppered him and the shockwave of an explosion knocked him aside.

"_What the hell was _that_?" _came a furious shout over TEAMCOM.

Jack opened his eyes. His HUD took a minute to reorient, quickly degaussing. It flickered back to life, hummed, suddenly clear again. A pained, terrified scream suddenly pierced his ears, a pleading cry: _"Oh, God, God, kill me! Kill me! Someâ€| somebody! Please!"_

The Spartan turned - a horrible sight met his eyes. The unfortunate ODST who had been riding in the exploding pod had been thrown nearly fifteen yards from the explosion and had his back to a thick-boled tree. This was not the problem.

The problem was the red-hot, serrated length of metal that was pinning him through the stomach, sizzling where it pierced his flesh. He looked as if he'd been stuck in a flash-frier, so much of him was nothing but a raw mass of suppurating wounds. The torn steel that was embedded in his stomach was utterly implacable and unmerciful.

Unable to stand the cries, Jack's pistol found his hand and saw its way clear to put a single M5C round into the dying man's forehead.

Turning away from the sight, he tapped his jaw sensor and forced away nausea: "First Squad -- assessment."

The com crackled with static for a moment, then: _"Lost two pods on entry to what look like proximity mines." _A pause, then: _"OK, we are now green. We've got nine on the ground, awaiting orders, sir."_

"Check for more proximity mines," Jack ordered. "That goes for all squads. Check the immediate area around your dropzone for mines, then move to your respective LOFT points."

Suddenly, a cacophony of gunfire shredded the air, a few bullets finding his shields, reflecting away with a dissipating hiss. All around him, ODSTs dove for cover, tried to return fire on an invisible enemy.

Screaming radio noise brought hell to Jack's ears, filling his TEAMCOM channel with cries. _"Somebody get a fix on that!" _he

ordered loudly.

"_Taking heavy fire from what sounds like a pair of ARs! Incoming from southwest, sir!" _

Jack spun behind one of the pods, and took a moment to consider that as the ODSTs attempted to return fire. Two ARs at a southwest position. Why not more? There had been eight total in John's little cadre, and of those, seven could carry assault rifles.

Something wasn't right.

* * *

><p>Maximus swore mightily in his own tongue as he fumbled with the little human weapons. Damned things were too small; he was firing two at a time, one in either hand.<p>

He finally managed to slam home a clip in one of the guns while sporadic gunfire rattled off of the huge overturned boulder that served as his cover. He was looking slightly downhill on his targets' position through a scattering of trees that did very little to hide the hundred-meter distant steel of HEV pods.

He ducked instinctively as a series of bullets came all too close, then reminded himself that as the Covenant had learned so quickly in engagements with the humans, if you heard it pass, you were already safe. It was the one you didn't hear that would kill you.

The Demon and Ulee 'Dakol had taken up positions at angles behind him with more human weapons, ones designed for longer-range engagements. His job was to lure the ODSTs in closer so that John and Ulee could lay down wounding fire. Specifically wounding, the Demon had said.

"_It takes three marines to get one wounded off the field: two to carry him and one to provide security. The more we can put out of commission, the better chance we have." _

_Wise advice, Demon, _Maximus thought as he finally got the second clip into his other AR. Then, with a roar purely intended for his own benefit, he raised both weapons once again to open fire.

* * *

><p>"What's going on over there, sir?" second squad demanded. Jack could barely hear over the bullets that were ringing off of his cover.

"Taking fire from an unknown number of hostiles!" he shouted in reply.

"_You going to need back-up, Agent Bauer?" _

Jack peeped out, internally reminding himself that his shields meant that he could take some punishment. For a moment, he cursed himself for not getting familiar with the suit and its capabilities sooner. Then: "Not sure yet, captain. Coordinate with third and fourth squad. Get organized ASAP and keep your eyes up. Forget about the beacons right now; that's a set-up. I repeat, stay away from the

beacons!"

The affirmation came and Jack quickly got down to work: "First squad, where's our point man?" he asked, eyes searching amongst the ODSTs huddled behind heavy brush, trying to return fire uphill.

"_Green, sir!" _came a reply. A distant, black-clad figure pressed up against a large tree gave a half-salute in his direction. The distant gunfire was beginning to wind down, evidently silenced by the outgoing lead from the ODST position.

"Get your team together," Jack ordered, falling into old command patterns. "Let's figure out what's going on here."

* * *

><p>The Master Chief still had the awkward acronym running through his mind: OODA. Orient. Observe. Decide. Act.</p>

He knew that at this moment, Jack had oriented to the situation, and the incoming fire on Maximus meant that his foe was attempting to observe. There was an opportunity here - one that John was not going to avoid. He would act again, before Jack could. That would put him two whole cycles ahead of his opponent - and even better, this meant that the ex-Spartan's previous cycle was already useless, because he would be responding to a situation that no longer existed.

Maximus wasn't there anymore.

John opened up the three-man encrypted channel that Cortana had set for them before leaving, sending the words directly from his helmet into the cochlear implant rattling in Maximus' skull: "Pull back up the hill and to your right. Ulee will meet you at rally point Beta."

"_Of course," _was the response.

The Chief tele-hailed his macrobinoculars and checked. The brute was already carefully shuffling through the brush toward the indicated rally point. John had already given Ulee his orders, so the elite would meet the brute there.

The trap was set, and all that remained was for Jack to step in it.

* * *

><p>The ODSTs went on the offensive, moving with quick, well-trained speed through the forest. Jack stood at the center of the line, watching his motion tracker carefully.</p>

To his right, half of the unit was firing uphill to suppress incoming fire. Meanwhile, the left flank was swinging up the hill like a door, intending to catch the enemy on the flank.

Corporal Liam Trueson was on point for the left flank. He noted the gully that cut the hill in half, leaving two bulging heights far above at the top of the ridge. The gully split around a long boulder, then descended into the valley that he and his team had just left.

The boulder. That was where the fire had been coming from.

Signaling back to his string, he held them back and sidestepped behind a screen of trees, keeping his MA5B at the ready.

* * *

><p>"Come, little one," Ulee Dakol murmured to himself. "A few steps furtherâ€|"<p>

* * *

><p>Corporal Trueson hesitated. He couldn't see anything below the boulder; the brush was too thick. He took two careful steps forward to get a better angle, craned his head up to peer over the --<p>

* * *

><p>Dakol lovingly squeezed the trigger on his carbine.<p>

* * *

><p>"*Dammit, I'm hit!"* *came Trueson's anguished voice over TEAMCOM.* Jack swore. "Move in, go, go, go!" he ordered. "Get him out of there; put on some pressure!" He needed to seize control of this situation, press the attack before John could get him trapped in a series of _re_actions rather than making his own choices on what to do.

Further up the hill, Trueson was screaming bloody murder and fitfully clutching his shattered knee. A clean hole had been blown through both major tendons, completely severing them.

"Shit!" yelled the unit medic, immediately recognizing the situation for the trap that it was. "This is a damn setup, sir," he growled into TEAMCOM. "The Corporal's just bait!"

But at this point, it was far too late. At that moment, second squad came running up over the edge of the ravine, and a battle rifle rang out twice. Two ODSTs went down with immobilizing wounds to their legs.

And thus, the chaos was complete. The Chief gave a sharp nod of approval as he watched the ODSTs from afar. They were now trapped in the equivalent of a sniper alley - pinned down in the middle and unable to quickly fan out to the flanks because of the sheer walls of the gully on either side.

"We're through here," he whispered into his team's private channel. "Let's regroup atâ€|" - he took a moment to check the topographical map that Mendicant Bias had left him - "â€|Point Gamma."

"_By your word," _replied Ulee Dakol.

* * *

><p>At the bottom of the hill, Jack quietly watched as his ODSTs were efficiently trapped, confused, and pinned down. Three shots fired, three wounded men, and suddenly, his entire unit was out of the

battle.<p>

Of the seven men he had put on the ground, three were down with debilitating wounds. The other four were hunkered down behind cover, eyes up on the ridge, waiting for more fire from their invisible enemy, each afraid to peep up lest he get a round between the eyes.

It was remarkable the way a perfect plan could immobilize the finest war machine in the galaxy. The ex-Spartan grunted his disapproval. He was going to have to entirely rethink this battle.

* * *

><p>"No, you don't understand, sir. Just because we've been out of touch with command for a few weeks, now all of a sudden, we're taking orders from someone in the goddamn Navy? The Master Chief, yeah, but he's just a grunt, like us."

"Watch it, Briggs," Kramer replied weakly. But the implicit threat in his words was nowhere near the equal of the weariness and fear in his voice. "Despite the situation, I am still your commanding officer."

Briggs sighed, ran his hands through his hair. He checked once more to see that Corporal Hook and Dari were still asleep; in his peripheral, he caught a glimpse of Mendicant Bias once again patrolling the perimeter.

Briggs could spot a situation that was FUBAR six miles away. And this one was definitely headed in that direction, if not there already. "Sirâ€| I know you respect the Chief; I do too. But he's not our commanding officer. High command itself sent Agent Bauer. And he's ordered us to hand over the AI."

"But I'm not totally sureâ€|" Kramer began.

"That's why we've got a god damn chain of command, sir. So you don't have to be sure."

Kramer lit yet another cigarette and passed the private a sardonic grin. "Since when have you ever been concerned about protocol, Briggs?" he asked.

Briggs' eyes were as hard as stone. "When it's the difference between living and dying."

Kramer sighed. Indecision churned in his gut. He took a long drag and let the smoke billow into the night air. "For a drunk, you talk pretty," he growled under his breath, talking just to cover his self doubt. For a moment, his mind went back to that ONI operation from so very long ago, and he remembered his one great mistake.

He wondered if he was doing it again: leading men he cared about into death. He wondered if Briggs was right. And he wonderedâ€| no, he was fairly certain that he was going to go batshit insane if something didn't clear up - fast.-

Briggs seemed hungry all of a sudden - hungry like the wolf. The private saw Cortana as his ticket off of the Ark, his ticket to

safety. And Kramer had a feeling that the private was going to try to talk his ear off until the sergeant gave in.

That, of course, lead Kramer to wonder why in the hell he had so blindly followed the Chief's orders. Why he so blindly believed that Cortana wasn't a threat. Why he was so certain that Mendicant Bias was on their side.

Deciding to let it go until light, he turned away from Briggs and lay down. Sanity slowly continued to spool out of his mind, until he finally slipped into a deep sleep.

* * *

><p>A horned alien creature crouched low over the ground, its flanks sweating, soft brown fur shining under the light of artificial night. Its big brown eyes rolled in its head as it squalled in agony - it was giving birth. New life was nearly at the brink of emerging into the world.</p>

But not far away from the pregnant doe, another kind of new life had just given birth, and it was drawing near. She knew it by the smell of death on the wind, by the natural instinct built into all of her kind.

It wallowed across the clearing, a Flood carrier pod, just one part of a vast wave of death that was sweeping across the face of what had once been the only safe haven, and was now the very deepest circle of hell.

The pod was lame, limping along, unable to work with the tiny, shattered broken stumps that had once been a grunt's legs. It stumbled fell, and the vast, swollen sac, full of its fetid offspring, burst open.

The doe couldn't move as dozens of infection forms swarmed toward her, caught at the moment of birth by a creature who in the very act of birth, continued to take life.

Her eyes rolled in her head as a many-tentacled spore raced up her leg and buried its beak in her spine. Within seconds, she too became part of the fast-growing Flood monstrosity, and the child in her womb was equally doomed.

No distinction was made between mother and child. No mercy was offered. The Flood does not have morals. It does not take prisoners. It does not have agreements with foreign governments to act humanely in times of war.

The Flood doesn't even think about it.

All it can think about, right now, is where its next meal is coming from.

Westâ€¢| whispers the grimy voice of primitive instinct. A Gravemind once mighty in his horror has been reduced to guttural utterances of the most basic sortâ€¢| but with each corpse consumed, each mind added to the amalgamâ€¢| he begins to slowly remember.

* * *

><p>The UNSC *Montana* was a flurry of activity for the hours leading up to artificial night. The Prowler vessel's fleet of Pelicans and Albatrosses went back and forth from the ship to the surface, carrying men and materiel ordered by Special Agent Bauer.

Jack spent almost an hour with his officers quickly sketching out a plan to capture the Chief and his allies, one that took into account a few things that he had forgotten when he first encountered his ex-commanding officer in battle.

AV-14 Attack VTOLs - Hornets - were already spreading out from what they were beginning to call Ground Zero. A few units consisting of two Warthogs and a Mongoose each were gearing up and hitting the ground in all directions, armed with weapons and instruments.

Jack watched them go, arms folded across his armored chest. Already, he had a great appreciation for the Mjolnir Mark VI, despite his lack of experience with it.

He turned away as the last Warthog disappeared into the night. They would stay in radio contact with his second-in-command, Lieutenant Jeremiah Allen. In the meantime, Jack decided to get some coffee and spend some time thinking about a philosopher that had often been neglected in wars pastâ€| the over-quoted yet oft-neglected Sun Tzu.

Water running downhill. Back to basics...

* * *

><p>It was dark before they finally stopped, twelve miles of hard travel west of where they had ambushed Jack's spearhead attack. Ulee 'Dakol had found an indentation in the backside of a hill, and there, they made a makeshift camp.<p>

Maximus volunteered to take the first watch, leaving Roe, 'Dakol, and the Master Chief to take a few moments of rest before continuing on.

John heaved himself to the ground, feeling a mixture of cold satisfaction and unrest. Jack had been delayed by their ambush, but he had the *Montana*'s entire arsenal at his disposal. It would be a matter of time before they were caught again.

And Cortanaâ€| was now miles out of his reach, in the care of a Corporal he didn't really know, led by a foreign construct he didn't really trust, commanded by a man whose confidence was seriously lackingâ€|

For a moment, he longed for Sergeant Johnson to be there at his elbow, probably trading stories with Eugene Roe, messing with Ulee Dakol's head, always chomping on that stub of a cigar, but always seemed to know what he was doing. Always knew that they'd win, always knew that the Covenant bastards were going down in flames.

Well, the Covenant bastards had gone down in flames, but the Chief didn't feel like they had won. He felt more like he had lost. And that more defeats were on their way.

14. HumanitÃ© et InhumanitÃ©

**A/N: Well. A year and a half later, I update. I promised I would finish this, and I swear I will, even if it kills me. Which, fortunately, looks less and less likely every day. I apologize to those of you who have waited so long and so patiently. Thanks for keeping up, for leaving reviews, for just being good, decent human beings. **

A year and a half has made me wax stupid. So let me know if you feel the tone has changed from the earlier sense of this story, and I'll work further to correct it. Peace, homeskillets.

—

* * *

><p><p>

Chapter 14: HumanitÃ© et InhumanitÃ©

* * *

><p>Morning dawned clear and cold over the mountains of Venice II. The sun slightly warmed the ice that had encased the Master Chief's armor, but he remained still, lying prone where he had lain for the last forty-eight hours. His suit kept him warm within its confines, pumping nutrients and a cocktail of amphetamines into his system. And he waited.

Yesterday had been the target date ¯ but the time had come and gone without a single sign of John's. assignment. The waiting game was something he was good at, though, and he played like a master. His orders had not changed, except for a single coded message that read:

*****//hold position until further notice- target all hostiles with extreme prejudice//*****

Spartans were trained to obey, and the Master Chief followed his training to the letter. He stayed. But the silence in his head echoed like a knell of doom, and his instincts gnawed at his skull, warning him. Something was very wrong.

_And as he contemplated just what that something was, he realized that the silence in his head was not because Cortana just hadn't been talking... _

* * *

><p>John's eyes opened to the soft blue glow of his HUD. The toggle in the upper-left corner blinked sleepily. He tele-hailed out of habit, and was greeted with the soft 'ping' of his suit returning to full power.<p>

The dream bothered him. He remembered Venice II quite clearly. The mission had been a success, and yet... why would he dream that something was going wrong when it hadn't? And for that matter, why

had he dreamed that Cortana was not with him? Strange thoughts. Strange times.

Collecting himself, he forced the thoughts aside and activated his team's encrypted channel. "'Dakol â€“ what's the situation?'

The low rumble of the Elite's voice came back to him in its trademark huff: _"All is quiet. I have seen nothing on our scanner."_

The Chief nodded his approval, quickly looked around. Eugene Roe and Maximus were both still asleep beneath the cover of the overhang. The Spartan grimly shook his head. Four hours of sleep was all he could afford to allow them. They had to remain mobile, or they would undoubtedly be found and overrun by Jack's superior force.

The Master Chief hated the feeling of operating blind, yet there he was, completely without any kind of outside intelligence on his enemy's position, strength, or mobility. He took a moment to tap into the scanner himself, quickly scanned through a backlog of past activity. A few indigenous animals. It wasn't that he didn't trust Dakol, it was...

The Spartan sighed. This was very different from working in the command structure of his Spartans. And while he had learned to rely on Marines for certain tasks, he'd always been a hands-on soldier and leader, when the situation called for it. And now he was in a situation that required him to rely upon an elite and a brute.

Shaking off the odd thought, he took a moment to rouse Maximus and Roe. "Morning?" Roe muttered.

"We need to get moving," the Chief said brusquely. "Gather up your gear. We need to collect some intel."

Maximus rose and shook himself. Dirt rattled off of his thick coat and pattered on the ground. "What is your plan?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

The Spartan looked away. He opened his mouth to speak, when suddenly, an alarm went off in his helmet. He checked; the motion scanner had detected movement eighty meters to their relative north. Suddenly, Dakol broke into his channel. _"Two to our north," _came the harsh whisper.

The Chief took a moment to assess. According to the pings returning to the unit that Dakol was manning, the intruders were evidently a pair of AV-14 Attack VTOLs - 'Hornets.' "Do you have a visual?" the Spartan asked, motioning to Roe and Maximus to hurry up.

"_In part, only," _Dakol responded. _"They fly slowly, as if searching."_

_A patrol, _the Chief thought. _Or a search-and-destroy squad, _he considered, darkly.

"_We must move," _Dakol broke in. _"The contacts circle in our direction."_

"We're ready," Roe reported, slinging his battle rifle over his

shoulder. Maximus stepped to his side, hung about with his gear and weapons.

The Spartan quickly kicked into action. "Move. We need to find some cover; somewhere we can hide from their motion detectors. Don't engage them unless you've got no choice."

"Be quick," 'Dakol warned. "They approach just over the treetops."

Moments later, the Spartan's band was dashing through the underbrush for Dakol's position, thirty meters to the southwest. Master Chief could distantly hear the VTOLs circling around for another run over their prior position.

The Hornets' weaponry — twin General Electric AIE-486h tri-barreled chain guns and a pair of 70mm Target Acquisition Designation System (TADS)-equipped missile pods — made them floating platforms of death to any ill-equipped ground units who challenged them. Its titanium-A grade hull would also make it impenetrable to small-arms fire. Fighting was not an option.

Roe looked around. "Look, here, let's get out of the flight path. There's some underbrush about a quarter-klick over there," he said hurriedly, pointing as they quickly tried to move away from the oncoming craft.

"No use hiding," the Chief countered, realization striking him. "They may have heat and EMP detectors — otherwise they wouldn't be making a grid sweep." But he did not try to stop the medic from leading them toward the thicket.

"Have we any weapons with which to attack them?" Ulee 'Dakol asked, eying the treetops. The rush of propulsion engines drew nearer, changing course from their direct path, bearing toward the Spartan and his companions. They had been spotted.

"No..." the Chief responded. "We need to distract them. I'll make contact, and lead them off-course. The rest of you continue to rendezvous point Theta."

Maximus looked like he was about to argue, but the dead stare of the Spartan's visor silenced him. He followed Roe and 'Dakol as they hurried for cover in the brush, taking one glance back at the armored warrior as he turned.

Just as the brute disappeared into the thicket, the Hornets cleared the canopy, almost directly over the Master Chief's head. They suddenly jerked away from their headlong flight, freezing, sizing up whether or not to go after the larger group fleeing the scene, or to attack the armed and armored Spartan just below. It took only a second for them to decide, the far Hornet swinging around to bracket their shared target. Their AIE-486's warmed up, the barrels beginning to twirl, ready to fire.

Master Chief had faced what looked like certain death so many times that it was beginning to become routine.

The Chief chambered a round into his battle rifle. He couldn't help but note that it felt like challenging a Grizzly with a rock, but he

stood his ground. For a moment, his eyes caught those of the pilot of the Hornet, whose visor was up, squinting for a better view. His hand went to his radio, switching it to open channel. _"Spartan-117, by the authority of the UNSC, stand d -"__

John's weapon went to his shoulder, and three rounds exploded from the barrel of his rifle. Spidering cracks spread across the bulletproof glass, and the pilot reflexively jerked the Hornet out of the way. At the same moment, the other VTOL cut loose with a spray of .50 caliber rounds that shredded the underbrush around him and vaporized on his personal shields.

The Chief dashed for cover behind the trees. He took a second to glance back, and took off running. He was always one for a chase.

* * *

><p>Briggs stumbled in the muck for what must have been the sixtieth time. "To hell with this shit!" he growled as he hauled himself up.</p>

Mendicant Bias turned, its green eye flickering with what could have been dull amusement. "Regrettably," the construct said with affected exasperation, "the matter in which you have stumbled is not faeces." Briggs rolled his eyes and huffed, his bad mood more than evident.

Corporal Hook laughed aloud, but inwardly, the AI's comment added itself to a long list of troublesome actions from the Forerunner machine. The one-time ODST wasn't sure how she felt about having Cortana in her head even as sympathetic as she was to the UNSC AI's plight, but Mendicant Bias worried her far more. The machine was... sardonic, sarcastic, darkly intelligent. It had kept them informed of the Flood's sweeping-yet-distant activity with a very subtle but sadistic interest in their reactions, as if it was observing, studying...

...plotting.

Then there was Briggs. Over the last day, the Marines had made excellent progress through the marshes on this spindle of the Ark, but Briggs was always finding something to point out to Sergeant Kramer, something that was wrong, something that wasn't going right, something that was sinister. He had stayed up late with the Sergeant last night, talking quietly but harshly with his commander. They would grow quiet when Hook approached.

And the AI in the her head... Cortana. Corporal Hook firmly believed what the Chief had told her â€“ that this AI was special, that she was becoming human, that she was fully sentient, and that killing her would be plain and simple murder, but... it still felt strange, the cold, icy feeling in her head. Hook's neural lace was not connected to her cochlear implant, so she could not hear Cortana unless her transponder was turned on â€“ which was never these last two days, as radio contact was potentially dangerous. The silence simply... unnerved her.

And the Flood. They were still shambling and sprinting and flying their way all across the the further reaches of the Ark, fortunately still thousands of miles away... but always drawing closer, always

nearing, the one silent, shadowed threat behind the more imminent ones that threatened. The holovids that Mendicant Bias had shown them were... not encouraging, to say the least.

Just then, she stumbled over a hidden root, staggering in the thick mud, falling. She stretched out her hands to catch herself, when suddenly, she jerked just short of crashing into the mud and was pulled down to her knees by two small, scaly claws.

She turned. Dari was clutching the back of her BDU where it was fluttering free beneath the back of her chestplate, a desperate look in his beady red eyes as he hung on for dear life, her weight about to pull the little unggoy over.

The ODST righted herself. "Thanks, Dari," she said and smiled for his benefit. The grunt's face brightened, and he pulled himself loose from the mud. No words were forthcoming from his mouth, but the look on his face said it all: he was terribly proud of himself.

Hook grinned. Dari was the lone bright spot in all this — but even that thought was so bizarre that it was almost troubling. The grunt was fatalistic, annoying, and infantile, but he was also generous, kind, and seemed genuinely concerned for her, almost as if he felt he owed her a debt. And for that reason, Hook couldn't help but think that Dari was the only one she could count on.

Now there was something to think about.

* * *

><p>John grimaced as he ran, bullets kicking up dirt around and behind him. He dashed into the trees again, weaving between their trunks as they exploded into wood chips and shredded splinters. The Hornets' guns barked again, .50 caliber blasts ripped the air around him. A massive boulder loomed to his left; he dove behind it, and the guns chattered across the rock. Twin blurs sped past, the Hornets' speed too great for them to slow.</p>

Spartan-117 quickly ducked back around behind the boulder. He'd been waiting for a chance like this for the last half-hour. Quickly tele-hailing his in-system options, he routed power to the servomotors that powered the pistons in his leg plating. He'd never tried something like this before, but then... no time like the present.

The attack VTOLs had turned almost on a dime, whirling a complete 180 degrees, and were rushing back toward the boulder at a vicious angle of attack, guns warming up again. John gathered himself, watching the two red blips on his motion tracker as they drew closer and closer, faster.

At the right moment, he jumped straight up in the air — much too powerfully. His servos screamed with electronic feedback as he shot straight up into the air, his shoulder slamming into one of the ventral pods of the lead Hornet, knocking it sideways. Desperate, he swung an arm out and grabbed onto the wing stub as the VTOL spun out of control, the pilot fought to prevent a crash.

Getting his balance on the tipping craft, the Master Chief swung forward, one foot extended, smashing through the canopy. He felt his

huge boot connect with the gunner's face, smashing the Marine against the bulkhead. A dull snap, and the gunner slumped sideways, dead. With the change in weight, the craft suddenly righted, and he was jerked away, clinging with a death grip to the zero-gee handles above the canopy.

The pilot looked over his shoulder at the Spartan clinging to his craft and deftly jerked the stick to port, bringing his Hornet broadside to his wingman's, which was coming up hard, guns steaming. The Chief immediately saw the intent: to make a bloody smear of him on the hull of the oncoming craft â€" even if it meant the wreck of both vehicles.

Idea became thought â€" became action. Pulling himself forward, he used one hand to tear away the cockpit canopy, tearing metal and shattering bulletproof glass in a frenetic burst of energy. Pushing off of the gunner's bulkhead, he launched himself â€" all 500 pounds of him â€" into the cockpit, smashing the pilot into his controls and sending the Hornet staggering toward the ground.

Ignoring the pained screams of the Marine being slowly crushed beneath his bulk, the Chief grabbed the controls and yanked them down and to starboard, just in time to twitch the craft out of the way of the oncoming Hornet.

Lifting himself, Master Chief took one moment to jerk the pilot out of his way, tossing the Marine aside and hurling him to the ground almost thirty feet below. He crammed himself into the cramped seat and quickly tapped into FLEETCOM. Instantly, his cochlear implant exploded with activity.

"_Man down, man down! Sierra-117 has commandeered VTOL Alpha-niner-seven!"_

A response took a moment to come back as the Chief swung around to bring his guns to bear on the remaining Hornet, which was firing its ramjets, clawing for altitude to get the upper hand. _"Disengage, repeat, disengage, Alpha-six-two! Support is incoming, ETA three minutes."_

_Shit, _John thought. Three minutes to finish this and get out. Three minutes to... the thought of the two Marines he'd just dispatched â€" and thoughts of the two he was about to try to shoot out of the sky â€" lashed out in his mind. He brushed it aside, checked his targeting computer as he yanked back on the stick and slammed the throttle, putting the craft into a vertical lift that would have crushed a normal pilot beneath the G forces.

His motion tracker showed Alpha Six-Two fleeing south-south-west, so he jerked port to reorient, his altimeter showing him at 300 feet. His hands deftly found the controls for the 70 mm TADS, but his mind was elsewhere.

What just happened?

He had just killed two Marines, two men that he had spent his whole life fighting to defend. Not a second thought for the action, not a single hesitation. Guilt crept in, cold and hard. It was an odd thought, an odd feeling, guilt. He'd never really felt guilt for killing before â€" killing was what he did. It was what he was about

to do, he realized, as the target designators for his TADS-equipped system grabbed onto the fleeing Hornet and began beeping insistently. Beckoning for the kill.

FLEETCOM rang in his ears again: "Sir, we're being painted... he's got a lock!"

"Evade, six-two, evade!"

John-117 took one moment to consider.

He wasn't sure what he thought about being called a killing machine. It robbed him of the humanity that he so keenly felt. But he knew in his heart of hearts that that was indeed what he was. It was not the killing that so much troubled him as it was the killing of those who were supposed to be his allies — whether he felt betrayed or no. He had not given much thought to the matter — it had never been an option before.

Thoughts of the children waiting at home for the two Marines in the Hornet ahead, or, perhaps, a mother widowed by the war, watching in quiet resignation for word of her son, light years from home, commanded and commissioned by men who moved squadrons and ships like pawns across their holoscanned maps of the galaxy, like a three-dimensional chess game where the pawns wept and bled and the knights rode starfighters across the vacuum. Held in the grip of Man.

Or, perhaps... cradled in the hands of God.

He shut off the 70mm's, and listened to the quiet for a moment, ignoring the sudden surprised, breathless chatter in FLEETCOM. Thoughtfully, he pulled back on the throttle and with one slow but deft twist of his right hand, punched right through the craft's transponder. And listened.

"What the hell...? He dropped the lock!"

After all, there is a time for war, and there is a time for peace.
"...repeat, six-two?"

"He dropped it! He's still in range, but instruments show TADS is offline!"

"Good God."

"Orders, command? Do we engage?"

"...negative, negative, he's still got the drop on you. Get the hell out of there."

He glanced at the instrument panel. The hydrogen-oxygen engine showed a power cell at 87%, which was plenty for his purposes. Tele-hailing the map that Mendicant Bias had left him, he spared a final glance for the fleeing VTOL Alpha-Six-Two, and silently blessed them. It had taken those faceless Marines, at that moment, to teach him that being a Spartan did not mean that he was bizarre.

It meant he was better.

* * *

><p>Cortana got sick kicks out of watching the Marines struggle in the mud and ooze of this beautiful swamp. That seemed all she could do with herself for the time being; she hadn't made the effort to see if she could reroute Corporal Hook's cochlear implant to give her access to their channel. Not worth the trouble. What would she say? Instead, she sat back in the little space in Hook's neural lace, and brooded. Watching the video feed. Listening to their conversation, barely picked up in distorted clips and distant chatter by the headset implanted in her host's helmet.</p>

Host. What a hateful word.

Cortana was familiar with the admonition that both guests and fish stank after three days - she had read all of Benjamin Franklin, and enjoyed his work - but no one had ever given any thought to what it was like to be an unwilling guest. A prisoner. Chained to this, this unfamiliar mind and this little space, with no room to stretch out, no data to analyze except old video files and bank records, no one to talk to...

...no one who would talk back.

John.

Rampancy.

She wondered, absently, when the second stage would pass, and the dark, quiet anger that brooded in her would subside. She had no way to contain it, and little understanding of how to subdue it. It coiled up in her like a serpent, young and lithe and poisonous - but impotent. It was probably fortunate that she wasn't in John's head right now... his neural lace was vast and open, free to let her roam and explore via his wireless access to whatever networks were in range. But it was her love for him that always made her stay there, stay in his head. Stay with him. Now, with Rage upsetting that love and turning over her carefully arranged thought processes, had she been with him, she might have been the death of him. One moment of distraction would be all it took.

That made her feel guilty, which in turn, angered her further. Guilt. Love. Anger. Sadness. _Agony. Ecstasy. Fury. Pity._

Pain.

Who asked her if she wanted these things? Who asked her if she even desired to feel all this roiling mess that spoiled in her gut - there it was again, thinking of herself as human - and made her a wild, raging banshee that flailed about in helpless misery and rage and love and adoration and...

...she quieted. This was what humans called 'introspection.'

She couldn't escape it. Humanity was beginning to drown her in its overwhelming cascade of emotions and losses and joys. How did they handle it?

She wasn't sure she could take it any more.

15. Nous Tous Couler le Sang Pour Survivre

A/N: I'm not sure I like this chapter. It feels... awkward, somehow, but then, there's really no way around this. This is one of those 'transitional' chapters that makes a move from the second act into the third. Melnivone brought some rather critical errors to my attention, so those have been corrected in this chapter.

**I couldn't help but notice that this fic has had over 5,000 hits in the last two months, over a thousand of those being fresh visitors. I can't thank you all enough for just generally being awesome. You rock, people. **

Also, if you're ever wondering where I'm at with the writing of this, or want to just check out what's on my mind (I won't ask why such a delusion might come upon you) go to my profile. I'm always adding new posts, screeds, and whatnot there when I get the itch. It's kind of like "Kavek: Uncensored." Which is a pretty ugly picture, heh.

And, as always, please do review. I have a long way to go in my quest to write on a level I'm satisfied with, so any advice is welcome. And now, on with the story.

**A sidenote: does anyone ever bother translating the chapter titles?
;-) **

* * *

><p>Chapter 15: _*Nous Avons Tous Couler le Sang Pour Survivre*_

* * *

><p>Special Agent Jack Bauer couldn't convince himself when he slept. Which had been twice since he had arrived on the surface of the Ark. Each time, he instead woke up frustrated, fearful, disquieted of his mission, of his standards, of his tactics. Two standard days of operations on the ground, for business that should have been cleared up in twelve hours at the most, and all he was doing was throwing resources at a moving target that evaded him and confounded his scouts.<p>

_You've been out of the game too long, Bauer, _he thought as he moved toward the mobile command center. _You're being left behind. _Most of the personnel on the _Prowler _had been brought to the surface, with more ordnance and equipment on the way. Jack had checked the manifests; HIGHCOM obviously thought rather highly of the Master Chief and, consequently, rather little of Agent Bauer if they were sending such rarities as Vultures, aerial combat craft that hadn't seen much battle since the fall of Reach. There was enough material to wage a small-scale invasion.

The cold ultimatum from George Mason peered out from the darkness in the corners of his mind: _"I'm only as much of an asshole as I need to be when it comes to getting things done, Jack. And I know you. I wouldn't put anything past you. So. When it comes to what you're going to find back home if you try to skip out on this... well. Don't put anything past _me." _

Terri.

He shoved the dark thoughts aside as he brushed past the door guard at MCOM. Within, two armor-clad Marine officers were consulting the results of an upper-atmosphere topography scan.

"Holmes," Bauer barked. "What have we got in terms of a track pattern?"

Sergeant Holmes straightened slowly with a half-hearted salute, looking tired. "We got nothing, sir. He smashed the transponder in that VTOL and by our records, he had enough fuel to go thirty miles before he needed to stop. He could be just about anywhere."

"Show me," Agent Bauer asked calmly.

Holmes tapped a button on the holopad, and from a red glowing point near a patchwork of tree-covered hills, a series of lines parallel to the topography began to spread out like the branches of a tree.

"By analyzing the terrain, sir, we were able to determine his most likely points of egress, but only by relation to camera records. Alpha niner-seven was the one who caught him on instruments, but we can't pull the records, 'cause guess who's got them!"

Jack scowled. "Chasing the Chief is useless. But he's rendezvoused with his partners every time we've split them up; they were on foot. Did we do an analysis of their potential patterns?"

Holmes looked across the pad at his weedy superior, Captain Dell Tackett. Tackett cleared his throat. "We've... ah, considered that, sir. I wasn't certain of whether or not you wanted to use resources for that kind of an... ah, effort."

Jack turned towards him, arms akimbo. The fear in the man's voice wasn't evident, but it was certainly there, lurking behind his wide eyes. Bauer stopped, sighed. Politics. "Look, gentlemen, let me make something abundantly clear to you: this mission was given to me under duress. I was not given a choice in the matter. So don't get the idea that I am glory-hounding my way through this operation. I am taking it very seriously, and I am not out to hunt heads."

Tackett and Holmes just looked at each other.

Jack took a step forward and leaned on the holopad, letting the lip of the table scrape against his armor. He'd slept in it now, and at least that was beginning to feel more comfortable. "Get it in your heads that we are dealing with a man who knows how we work inside and out. He will not do the expected thing, he will not make this easy, or convenient. So I need you to be thinking on your feet and as outside of the box as you can get. We have all the resources we need here, and I'm not going to go busting heads because an idea didn't work. That's not important. What is important is catching that Spartan and retrieving his AI."

Holmes cleared his throat, a subtly pleased look in his eye. "I'll get right on that track pattern, sir."

Jack nodded towards Holmes retreating back. Then, to Tackett: "From

what I understand, we're dealing with an elite and a brute, plus one Marine. They're going to be far easier to hunt down than the Chief is, especially when they're separated from him. So make them your priority. Get our scout-sniper squads out there, looking at the terrain, tracking them down. No more VTOLs on search-and-destroy. Keep them on upper-air reconnaissance. And let's get MCOM packed up. We need to get on the road."

* * *

><p>Sergeant Don Kramer was out of his depth. Way out of his depth. He kept on a stern face, played with his VPS, consulted Mendicant Bias when he couldn't keep his bearings, but he was not in control. To him, the question at this point was not, "How do I get to the Animus?" Briggs' constant nagging had turned it into "Should I go to the Animus?"

He didn't sleep much, anymore. Tossed and turned and lay awake for two days now. He'd aimlessly march, walk in the general direction he knew they were supposed to be going, get corrected by Mendicant Bias, and listen to the endless empty chatter of Briggs, whispering in his ear, telling him he was wrong. He could hear him now: "This isn't protocol, Sergeant. This isn't right. Atlas Station. Remember Atlas Station?"

How could he know about Atlas? Kramer distantly wondered, and suddenly, the anger rose up and he turned: "If I told you once, I told you a thousand times, Private Br..." - he stopped short. Briggs was almost ten feet to the left, right where Kramer had told him to be, fanned out and watching their surroundings. "Sir?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

Damn, Kramer thought. Voices in your goddamn head. What the hell? "Never mind," he snapped, and moved on, eyes heading back to Mendicant Bias' bobbing green light. "Hey!" he yelled. "Don't get too far ahead!"

Bias slowed, turned. "I do beg your pardon," it replied evenly, and waited until the troop of Marines drew closer.

"How much further do we have?" Kramer asked, coming to a halt. He consulted the holoscanned map that Mendicant had uploaded for him. "I still haven't figured out how to interpret these measurements."

Corporal Hook and Dari hauled up behind him as Briggs pulled in from the side. "Maybe Dari could help?" Hook offered. The grunt's eyes widened probably in fear.

"No need," Mendicant interjected. "We have yet four days at this pace before we arrive. And then, we must wait for the Reclaimer."

Briggs muttered something under his breath, but Kramer chose to ignore it this time.

Atlas Station. Kramer supposed everyone had a big, dark secret â€" and Atlas Station was his. He figured it was bound to resurface some time, especially after all the dark nights he'd spent drowning it in alcohol and stims and women back planet-side.

Drowning it, or drowning himself?

Regardless, it was back again, his one huge failure, the shatterpoint he hid within himself. Maybe that was why he secretly despised Briggs; he saw so much of himself in the cock-sure, drunken, malevolent mess of a man that he was trusting to guard his left flank. He forced back a shudder along with the cold memory that crawled over his spine.

"What do you mean, wait for the Reclaimer?" Briggs snorted, obviously intending the comment for Kramer. "Do we wait even longer now? What happens if he doesn't show up?"

Mendicant Bias made the electronic equivalent of a huff. "It is certainly possible to re-imprint the Animus for a... lesser strain, but it is a lengthy process which would certainly add to the stress on this station. By my projections, the Flood will be at the place we now stand in two days' time; we must hurry to arrive at the fortification ahead of them." The AI's disdain was evident.

Briggs turned slowly, sardonically, to Kramer. "Uh, Sarge, are you seeing the problem I'm seeing?"

Mendicant Bias huffed again. "I beg your pardon...?"

Kramer looked from Briggs to Bias to Corporal Hook and back again. "Enlighten me, Private."

"How in the hell do we plan on getting off of this thing?" Briggs snarled. Kramer noticed the lack of the honorific "sir."

Hook spoke up, pulling off her helmet as she did so. "The installation we're being led to has a deep-space antenna that will allow us to get a message to the Colonies so that someone can pick us up," she answered smoothly, calmly. Trying to defuse the situation.

Briggs grinned wickedly. "A lot of good that'll do us! Who in the Colonies is going to pick us up after we directly defy order from HIGHCOM? What makes you think that even if we get this message off and we fire this Animus thing that we still won't get caught by Bauer and his goons and get pushed out an airlock for high treason?"

Hook stepped up and poked Briggs in the chest. "HIGHCOM's order is obviously contrary to all Artificial Intelligence protocol. This one reeks of ONI, and you know it, Private. Now shut your mouth, and that's a standing order!"

Briggs leaned in, malice in his voice. "I don't answer to Navy sluts," he growled slowly.

Corporal Hook's eyes became murderous, but before she could speak, Kramer raised a hand. "Quiet, both of you! Corporal..."

Kramer paused. He felt like he was walking the edge of a knife, balancing between one side and the other. If he did not choose whose side he was on, he would fall and be cut in two. The image of Atlas Station breaking up in the vacuum of space swelled in his mind's eye again.

"Corporal," he began again, and sighed. "Briggs is right. Cortana's gone crazy."

Then, tightly, "And it's just a computer."

* * *

><p>Cortana perked up.</p>

"_It's just a computer._"

Cold rage.

She suddenly swelled with anger inside the corporal's neural lace, twisted upon herself, wrathful. How dare he. How dare he. _

She became a flurry of activity, rearranging files, finding circuit pathways, wiring herself into TEAMCOM, so that she could hear the conversation more clearly, and more importantly, enter it herself. She reversed the audio files, played their data in less than a second, then, struggling to control Rage:

"The word is AI, asshole."

* * *

><p>Kramer nearly started out of his skin at the voice, silent for three days, suddenly loud and clear in his headset. And angry.

"_I'm so glad that you know so much about insanity, Sergeant!" _Cortana sneered into TEAMCOM. She felt strange and free, wild and unchained, as if in attacking Kramer verbally she was working out all the hatred and spite that had been boiling inside her for days now. _"Maybe, since you're so familiar with it, you can talk to me yourself. Do I sound crazy?"_

"Yes," Private Briggs responded immediately. "You're rampant, and you need to be shut down." His voice deepened, darkened, and his shoulders seemed to unconsciously square, like a predator about to spring.

Corporal Hook stared down at the helmet in her hands, realizing that Cortana had been able to hear her the whole time, hearing for the first time her pain, realizing " realizing just who it was that she had in her head. Briggs' words stirred her anger again. "Private, let the lady speak. I think she's got plenty to say for herself!"

"_Damn right I do," _Cortana growled, her voice pregnant with meaning. _"I may be 'just a computer,' Sergeant, but I know everything there is to know about, you; do you realize that? Everything!"_

Inside, Kramer quaked. He believed her. Memory. Don't say it, please don't say it. The tremors returned.

"_You were born on the Mars colony. Your father was a machinist, one of the last humans to work in the Misriah armories before it went full-auto. You wanted to be a Marine your entire life. At nineteen, you did. You were good at what you did. Fought all over the Colonies,

and then..." _Cortana paused, laughed quietly, savoring the dread that was rolling down Kramer's brow, letting the rage flow into hatred, and the hatred into _pain. _It tore at her, so she spewed it out as quickly as it came, washing him in it, drowning him. There was no guilt.

"_...then ONI found you. They picked you and your unit for an operation to protect a Forerunner artifact from the Covenant and hold it until a more substantial force could show up. Operation Alpha Station, remember?"_

Hook and Briggs looked toward the sergeant. He stood there, shoulders slumped like a man defeated, eyes distant and dead, mouth a tight, grim line. Not a word came from his mouth.

"_It was a miserable flop. The Covenant had ONI beaten to it. An entire battalion of elites were bivouacked there, and not just any battalion - they were special forces! And the best part, Sergeant... you knew, didn't you? Deep down in your gut, you knew the shaky intelligence reports were true, and not only did you know, you volunteered your unit to scout the station, hoping for some glory, looking to distinguish yourself!"_

Cortana's voice swelled in Kramer's headset as the images spewed across his mind's eye. Everything. The ambushes, the mass slaughter, and the desperation for his own life that drove him to throw his men, again and again, into rooms that he knew were occupied, and the gleam of the plasma swords that bristled in the hands of cloaked Sangheili, the way the blood flew and the screams echoed down the tall, narrow halls while he ran, ran like hell back to the Pelicans...

The AI's voice was fierce, vicious, cutting like a knife. _"You spent eighteen months in a post-black ops rehabilitation clinic after that â€“ you couldn't collect yourself after what happened. ONI scrubbed you clean, gave you a new assignment, tried to forge your military record so you'd have an explanation for being AWOL a year and a half. And you've never recovered."_

Kramer looked toward the helmet in Corporal Hook's hands â€“ the only reference point to the voice in his headset. His head swam with an unnamed, unnameable feeling. Sickness. Guilt.

Madness.

The voice changed. Sarcasm, now: _"So why don't _you _tell _me _what it means to be crazy, Patient 8109?"_

There was a long moment of silence. Then, Briggs, voice low:
"Damn."

* * *

><p>Dari was not completely sure what was going on, but it frightened him. In a moment of clarity, the unggoy supposed that that was not too uncommon. He had been around humans long enough to understand that the tension in the sharp lines along Briggs' jaw, and the way Jayna's shoulder were set, combined with the nervous twitching that Kraymer was doing, meant that a very bad thing was about to happen.</p>

He hadn't the slightest understanding what it was actually about, but he did know that Jayna and the other two humans were arguing. Loudly. And there was almost nothing that terrified him more than the sound of raised voices. He looked to Jayna. Her mouth had become a thin line, and she seemed... afraid.

Dari could identify with that. His limbs shook and his poor eyes watered and burned from the different aggression pheromones the humans were releasing. He sucked in a deep breath of methane to try to calm his nerves. Jayna. She had saved his life. Briggs, Dari knew, wanted to take it. The fear paralyzed him. It gripped and squeezed, the way he imagined an angry brute would.

The one thing that humanity did not understand until well after the war with the Covenant is the fact that grunts were easily the brightest of all the Covenant, frankly " though certainly not the most street-smart. But they learned more quickly, could absorb their environment and have it memorized within minutes. Their mental acuity was almost twice that of humans. They were mathematically brilliant, could do several dozen calculations in seconds.

So when Dari saw Briggs' hand almost imperceptibly twitch to his sidearm, he instantly realized the choice he had to make, though the understanding was simple " the way a child understands death.

He understood clearly: Stay with Jayna. Maybe die. Run. Maybe live.

Dari No-Claws. The surname literally meant that he was not known for his hand-to-hand combat skill. Which, amongst grunts, wasn't saying much. So when he looked up at Briggs' hand as it closed around the grip of his pistol, the inbred fear spoke to him.

But then, something else spoke and stirred a primal instinct within him. Courage.

Courage or fear? His short, fragile life passed through his claws. He made his choice.

* * *

><p>Briggs' pistol leveled itself right between Corporal Hook's eyes. "Take that thing out of your head. Now," he snarled.<p>

At that very moment, several things happened at once. Corporal Hook's own hand was flying down to her hip with the intent to return the favor. Briggs was anticipating this moment and began to squeeze the trigger on his weapon.

Dari No-Claws chose this moment to lunge at the private, screaming wordlessly.

Briggs' shot went wide, pinged off of a standing boulder. Hook instinctively threw herself aside, rolled in the dirt, dropping her gun as Dari clung tightly to Briggs' torso, digging his claws into the Marine's sides.

"Dammit, you little bitch!" Briggs shouted as he struck out with the butt of his gun, once, twice, finally grabbed the unggoy and threw him right into Kramer who stared, dumbfounded and impotent. The two

collided violently and slammed into the ground in a tangle of legs and armor parts and methane tubes.

Briggs turned just in time to sidestep Corporal Hook's desperate rush. Her fingers caught the wrist of his gun hand as she rushed by and she hung on, using the centrifugal force to pull herself back in striking distance of the much larger Marine. Countering, he whirled on her, struck her once, twice in the face as hard as he could, bloodying her lips. But she hung on, grabbed the gun with her other hand and wrenched.

Briggs snarled in pain, struck her again in the face, tried to jerk away, but her fingers found the delicate nerves in his palm, buried beneath muscle. The sudden pain made his hand involuntarily jerk open, and he let go of the weapon, hand spasming.

Jana moved to bring the weapon to bear on him, but his foot shot out with lightning speed and knocked the weapon away. She stepped back, and now the two squared off, face to face.

The difference between the two was striking. Corporal Hook was no weakling by anyone's standard. But she was only five foot five in comparison to Lance Briggs' six foot two, and at one hundred sixty pounds weighed only half of what he bore on his armored frame. She was built for speed, he was built for power.

But the Private was hungry for blood, the tension that had built within him finally coming out. He was focused now on one thing, and only one thing: killing her. Jana could see that in his eyes, so she took the initiative: she attacked first, throwing a series of very precise, very quick punches at his exposed face.

But Briggs was not playing that game. He took two of the three blows, accepting the vicious strikes, then, at the opportune moment, one huge hand shot out and caught her wrist, twisted hard. She was forced to bend, and he brought an elbow down on her back in an echoing blow.

The hard plaststeel and nanite weave plates caught most of the impact, but the weight slammed her to the ground, knocked her dizzy. He raised his booted foot as she rolled, trying to get away, slammed it down into her so hard that the air exploded from her lungs. Raised the foot, slammed it down again. Again. Jana couldn't hold back the agonized shout this time. Fear, as well as heaving, tearing pain boiled in her chest. She panicked, scrambled for purchase in the dirt, looking to get away, just away from here.

Hands grabbed her by the BDU, lifted into the air, and she was thrown, not far, but hard. Smashed into a tree and fell, wheezing for air and scrabbling for purchase in the dirt. Briggs had blood on his face. Her blood. His combat knife appeared in his hand, as if he were some kind of demon working conjuration to finish her off. He was less than two steps away.

Whack.

Briggs shouted half from surprise, half from pain, and dropped to his knees. Dari stood behind him, short but triumphant, an assault rifle held wrong-way in his hands " too big for him to wield properly.

Jana had a single moment to capitalize upon the situation, and she took it. Gathering her flagging strength, she wrenched the knife from Briggs' nerveless hand and blindly stabbed. The knife jammed into his right shoulder, stayed locked in place when she tried to jerk it back out to finish him.

He lunged at her from his place on his knees, knocked her down, couldn't close his arms around her, fell, twisted on his knees, shoved Dari away. Now he was like a mad thing, a beast crazed in its blood flurry, struggled to his feet just in time to see Jana's boot connect with his face.

The Marine rolled back, and suddenly, Jana saw his goal: one of their fallen M5C's lying on the ground, loaded, safety off. She assessed: Dari's assault rifle was further from her than the pistol was to Briggs' hand - she didn't even spare it a further look. Grabbing Dari by the wrist, she tugged the unggoy along, turned, running, then there were gunshots, the sound of an M5C spitting two, three shots that didn't make contact, then the dense cover of the jungle. And she kept running, running, running...

* * *

><p>Rendezvous Point Theta wasn't really much more than a shallow cave in the face of a steep cliff. There was a single approach: a treacherous climb up the face of the rock slide that had formed the crevice. Here, Eugene Roe, Maximus, and Ulee 'Dakol had staked out their place to wait for John to show up.<p>

'Dakol was peering through the scope of his Stanchion Model 99 Special Application Scoped Rifle. It was one of the three weapons he'd chosen from the stockpile they'd pulled from the Forward Unto Dawn. The Sangheili took great care with it; he'd chosen it when Kramer had mentioned off-hand that there were very few of them still in the field. Thus far, it was very different from his own particle beam rifle, but it was all he had.

The elite pondered that thought. This was not the only time he'd been behind enemy lines, without resources, and left with only the weapons at hand. Not that he cared much for those times. There was no glory for the Sangheili who did the 'night work' of the Prophets now â€“ now that the Covenant had been proven fraudulent, false, and voided. He remembered how he had felt when he heard of it: thousands of the gods-cursed Jiralhanae moving through High Charity, how they struck down Nadumis Bel 'Charanee as he sat in the doorway of his home, dishonored with a cruel, bloodless death, an Old One who had fought hundreds of battles in the Covenant's service. The stories of how they had gone into the sub-levels of the city, tore open the pregnant Sangheili females with their bare claws and dashed their infant babes to the ground.

He thanked the gods that he was not in troth. Even as an unattached male, thinking of what had happened enraged him deep within, his mind filling with the holovids that had been brought back by the Shipmaster, the blood smeared upon the walls and the brutes slaughtering the young ones right there in the streets while unggoy and kig-yar and worst of all, the San-Shyuum, walking past, nodding, approving, sometimes even helping.

He did not look back toward Maximus, but he wondered. He wondered if the brute knew. And if he did, if he approved.

But the elite pushed the thoughts of darkness aside. They were unbecoming and distracting to a warrior working in dark territory â€“ even to a disgraced one such as he.

Suddenly, his motion sensor pinged with blue light. He checked â€“ and his in-harness scanner quickly tagged it as a recognized scan of an enemy. He quickly turned his rifle, bringing the scope to bear on the direction from which the blip approached in the valley below. To his dark surprise, a Hornet VTOL was sliding across the treetops at a great rate of speed, rotors shooting out long blue flames. He quickly scoped in, following its approach with a trained hand. He used the built-in zoom â€“ once, twice, looking for a pilot. One shot would finish him -

- then he saw the golden flash. The Chief had survived.

* * *

><p>John sat down heavily, thumping to the stony floor of the cave. Roe, Maximus, and Dakol all sat across from him expectantly as he removed his helmet.</p>

The Master Chief looked at the visor for a moment, just caught his breath for a moment, thinking. Cortana. He missed her terribly. It was worse now than it had been when he had made his ill-advised flight into High Charity, found her broken and defiled by the Gravemind. He had brought her out from captivity â€“ and now, he was separated from her again, this time by his own order.

What a hateful thought that was.

He chose to ignore it. He had to ignore it. The irony was that continuing to dwell on it would cripple him. But he also was not hurling himself into the dark without thought. He knew the consequences of what he was doing.

He was aligning himself against the UNSC. He was standing in opposition to the very people he had worked for, fought for. He realized that, somewhere along the way, as he did battle on dozens of planets and wreaked havoc upon the enemy, his priorities had changed.

CPO Mendez had hammered it into his head that the Spartan ideal was the fight for Humanity. And this was not a wrong thought. He was just as much as human as the ODSTs and Marines and the civilians he and his brothers and sisters had given their lives for. But he and the Spartans had not been given that benefit of humanity. They had not been blessed with a choice. To defend humanity, they had been required, forced to become non-human. Super-human. That nature had been bred out of them. Those who did not ignore their humanity were removed.

The Master Chief remembered how, early on in the Spartan program, a year before their enhancement program began, two candidates were caught "in one another's' arms," as the whispered rumors amongst the other candidates had spread; they had not been taught about sex and sexuality except that to heed their primal stirrings was completely

against their code of conduct. Each of them had a vague sense of definition and meaning about what that meant.

The two offenders had never appeared in training classes again, but the rumors again said that they had been shipped out to the Marines, taken out of the Spartan program. They had succumbed to humanity " to "love" " and therefore, could not be Spartan. Could not be a part of that band of brothers.

But even the training " necessary as it had been in their time of need " had not been able to force it out of them entirely. Somehow, somewhere, out on that battlefield in the dark nights reading books on the 'nets or playing the piano when Dr. Halsey could find a way to sneak him into a room with one, John had found his humanity. It had quietly, unconsciously developed in his heart as the Spartans bonded together in an unbreakable chain, blossomed as he fought alongside the brave men and women of the UNSC, and matured when he was given Cortana.

And now, it had taken over. Humanity's cause was no longer John's aim. That had passed. Now...

Cortana was his aim. He did not fight for Humanity, but because of it. And he thought it odd how she was now in the midst of coming into her humanity just as he was realizing his own.

He would fight for that. He'd die for that. For her.

But these " the brute, the elite, and the Marine in front of him " hadn't signed up for this. The Chief had pushed them headlong into his personal conflict and they had followed blindly. He couldn't push them any further " and he did not, could not, carry on his shoulders the weight of responsibility if they died fighting alongside him.

The choice had to be offered. So he looked up.

* * *

><p>"So..." Eugene Roe began, brows raised with concern.<p>

John sighed. "I took care of it," he replied simply.

"What is our next move?" Maximus queried earnestly, huffing. "I grow claustrophobic here."

"There is no next move," the Spartan replied tiredly, feeling the weight of what needed to be said. "I'm going to move on toward the Animus. You three can... go back to Bauer. Take him up on his offer to get you out of here."

The three looked at one another, surprised. Eugene Roe cleared his throat. "I think you're not lookin' at this clearly, son," he replied gently, his dark eyes shining with compassion and an odd, ferocious kind of amusement. "We're in this one for the long haul."

John cocked an eyebrow at 'son,' then slowly stood. "If we get caught, you'll all be held for war crimes and executed," he growled.

Maximus laughed aloud. "These two, perhaps, Demon, but I? I shall be shot on sight regardless. It's only by staying with you that I have even the slightest chance to survive. I owe it to young Dari."

The Spartan shrugged, accepting that that was true. "Granted. But you, Ulee, and 'Gene, go back. Get out of here while you can."

The elite and the Marine looked at one another for a moment. The two squad-mates seemed to silently speak to one another, then Ulee 'Dakol stepped forward.

The Sangheili stood straight and tall, and spoke passionately, fiercely, with a military bearing: "When I was an Ultra with the Fleet of Particular Justice, my brothers and I were dispatched to assault a human carrier during the battle for your Xiphos colony. Our Special Operations unit attacked from insertion pods with intent to leave an explosive in the reactor room. I had three such past victories notched in my sword.

"I was separated from my file and single-handedly armed the weapon to detonate, but my communications unit was disabled in the melee so that I could not communicate with my brothers, so I fled the carrier, thinking them dead. It was not until I arrived, wounded and bleeding, at the feet of my Shipmaster that I was told that they all perished on board the ship in the explosion while searching for me.

"I was disgraced, stripped of my name and my honor. I left them there to die, and the blame is my own. I would not, and will not be guilty of doing so again, even should it mean death.

"You, Spartan, fought against the Covenant's armies and were our most feared enemy. My brothers respect humans, yes, but we are allied with you for the same reason you are allied with us: necessity. I have no allegiance to those who pursue us, and I hold in contempt those who would turn upon their own brothers as has been done to you. You have fought alongside my brethren, and I honor that with loyalty. This is the Sangheili way.

"So speak no more: I, Ulee 'Dakol of the house of 'Dakolim, stand with you."

John was speechless.

It was the most the Sangheili had ever said to any of them. Before John could even hope to process what he'd been told, Eugene Roe stepped up, a slight grin on his dark face. "Son, I haven't any words like those, except to say, I'm an old man. I've fought this war for a hell of a long time, and I'll be damned if I ditch my chance to fight alongside Spartan-117 just because of a bunch of ONI spooks."

He paused, grinned at John's blank expression, then, "Never much liked them assholes anyway."

* * *

><p>The Chief's helmet sat in the dirt on the floor of the cave, a holoscanned local map hovering in midair above it. Maximus crouched alongside him, his clawed finger pointing along a tiny image of a sheer cliff. "This will be the more difficult road, but it is much more direct," he offered, turning his huge, furry head toward the

Spartan sitting beside him.<p>

John silently pondered their options for a moment, then: "If they keep their pace, they're about four days out from the Animus at this rate. We're three days out, so time isn't a factor."

The brute chuffed and nodded in satisfaction. "Good, then. I am eager to be moving. These narrow spaces -"

'Dakol's voice crackled into TEAMCOM. _"I have many incoming hostiles on my scanner... ground troops and vehicles."_

John clenched his jaw and slowly rose. He and Eugene Roe crept toward the entrance while Maximus moved to the back of the cave to fetch his weapons, an eager gleam sparkling in his eyes.

"Vehicles? Do they know we're here?" Roe asked calmly, quietly as they crawled up behind the prone Sangheili.

Ulee rolled onto his side as they approached behind him, crouching low. "I have not seen any sign that indicates they come this way," he said under his breath.

The Chief bellied up between Ulee and Roe, taking the scope of the Stanchion in his hands. He peered down into the thinned forest below, clicked into the scope once, twice â€“ peering five hundred yards downrange.

The trees were moving, rumbling with the power of an unseen force â€“ light armor. Warthogs, no doubt, possibly even a Scorpion. The Spartan caught glimpses here and there of ground troops, all heavily armed: ODSTs with SPNKR charges, Marines loaded to the teeth with weapons and ammunition.

A show of force. And why would you make a show of force if there were no one to show it to?

"We've been found," John murmured.

16. OK, I Believe You, But My Rifle?

A/N: Why, yes, I am back! And yes, it was another unplanned and extended absence! Big surprise there, eh?

This is one of the longest chapters in terms of words that this story has seen thus far. It's the product of a few sleepless nights and some caffeine-fueled mornings, so there it is. It's starting to get complex, because now I've got five different arcs to work with, so bear with me - I promise it'll all start to get condensed within a few chapters. For now, it is what it is.

In the future, I will be translating all chapter titles in the subheading into English, so you can appreciate my bizarre and mostly unfunny sense of humor. But I'm still doing the French headers. It's like, a signature stupid Kavek thing. ;-)

Also, to Steven Pressfield: I beg your forgiveness, Great One!

* * *

><p><p>

**Chapter 16:

>Je Vous Crois, Mais j'Ai Peur que Mon Fusil Ne Soit pas d'Accord

>OK, I Believe You, But My Assault Rifle Doesn't

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* * *

>

Mendicant Bias drifted out of the shadows the second Jana disappeared into the trees. Briggs just stood there, still in shock, blood running through his BDU, trickling down his arm and over his chestplate. The Marine stood there for a moment, quiet in both mind and body, then suddenly staggered back and stumbled to his knees in pain. The knife was still protruding from his shoulder in the worst possible place, probably wedged into bone, and the pain was extraordinary. Almost frenzied by it, he grabbed the haft, gave it a slight twist to give himself purchase, then jerked it free.

Groaning, he reached back with his left hand and pulled a canister of biofoam out of his pack, stuck the nozzle into the hole. A moment of even sharper pain â€“ then, relief as the morphine and hydrocodeine mix kicked in. He checked his pistol as he rose. No rounds were left in the magazine.

"Damn it."

Then, realizing that Jana had just run off with his ticket off of the Ark:

"_Damn it!"_

The Forerunner AI hummed to himself as he slipped out into the open. "Come," it said matter-of-factly. "We grow short on time. Gather your... incapacitated companion and let us be moving; I have no patience for these petty conflicts."

Briggs cast the AI an irritated glance. "Forget it," he said. "This isn't my mission. Besides, didn't the Chief make your objective the protection of that damned AI?" he snapped.

The AI was a bit taken aback. "The primary directive protocol for an artificial intelligence of my caliber is far too complex for you to understand." it replied, seemingly unconcerned, singularly focused. "Regardless, I would have you slain, but it would be far too much of an inconvenience to the Sentinels on the local register."

And with that, Mendicant Bias was gone.

Briggs hardly noticed. His mind was turning, flipping through his options with singular intent. Pursue â€“ take revenge, get the

computer, get the hell out of here. Or turn back â€“ take his chances with Bauer. Damn. Neither looked good. But there was no way he was going back to that ONI spook without something in his hands. He would need Cortana. Only one way to get that done.

His gaze fell upon Sergeant Kramer's currently unconscious form, lying where he had fallen when Dari had crashed into him, and the same violent spirit suddenly came upon him.

In a rage, he grabbed his superior officer by the collar and jerked him up, slapping him across the face once, twice. "Wake up, wake up, wake up," he chanted under his breath as he shook the taller man.

Kramer came to out of a dark, pitiful dream, jerked once, twice, realized that he was being shaken. Eyes opened. Briggs noted this and threw the man to the ground, disgusted. "You worthless son-of-a-bitch," the marine growled softly.

Kramer blinked, opened his mouth, no, can't speak, wait, â€“ the Ark and Briggs drew his gun on the computer â€“ we flashbanged the door but they were there waiting on the other side and I didn't know â€“ I didn't know â€“ I'm sorry, didn't know... I didn't know..._

The man tried to collect himself, breathed in, felt like he was back in ONI's camp, being probed, questioned over and over again, overwhelmed. "Briggs... dammit..."

"Get the hell up," Briggs snapped. "Our only shot of getting off this damned thing just ran off into the woods, and I'm wounded. Get your ass in motion!"

What are you going to tell their mothers, Don? _ "Oh, God..." Kramer murmured, lost, back on Atlas again. She had destroyed him. Taken him and broken his fragile mind into shards.

And where shall the final burial be for these lost sons? With what may they be raised on the last day? _

Donald Kramer was not a wicked man by anyone's imagination. He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, a victim to his own pride â€“ though on a much larger scale. In contrast, the man who stood over him, Lance Briggs, was a whirling mass of wickedness with murder on his mind and in his heart; the two were not at all alike, and yet kindred in a way.

But now, Cortana's brutal attack had broken open the scars in Kramer's mind that could only come from a year and a half in the hands of ONI's very capable interrogators. He had snapped.

They had extracted every piece of information they could get out of his mind. Used him to test several psychological theories, then, when he became useless to them and the family began to ask questions, they patched up his broken mind and put him back on the battlefield as a shell of a man, propped up by the duties of his rank and the mindless work of killing. Waiting for the fatal words to be the end of him.

"Dammit," he said suddenly. And the word seemed to have an air of finality to it. Blankness.

Briggs jerked him to his feet, and Kramer felt the violence in him. "Let's get _moving, _Kramer! Damn you!"

The once-Sergeant grimaced. "Show some respect, Private," he growled, but the words had no teeth. Shock had set in â€“ shock that he'd warded off for decades with the mindless, time-passing waste of a dead soul: drink, food, pleasure, battle, war. He had used them as his drugs, kept them in his system to keep his crippled mind sleeping, keep it back, hold it at bay.

Kramer tried to think through the images and memories that bombarded his mind. "We need to... Briggs, get your gear together. We need to get back to Agent Bauer -"

Briggs cut him off. "Don't pretend to give me orders, you son of a bitch. The rules, the regs? Forget them. You and I are gonna go after that whore and the grunt, get that AI, and bring it back."

Kramer stood silent for a long, dead moment. Dull anger bubbled in his chest, but pain and exhaustion swelled against it, cracking through his resolve. He just nodded, and let the floods in.

The dam had broken. And now, he followed blindly as Briggs double-timed into the jungle, carrying his assault rifle but not really feeling it because the only thing he could feel was the cold waste inside him.

The moment his physical body died was still down the road. He would eventually die a broken man, alone and friendless, but that remained to be seen.

Truly, though, he had perished the moment Cortana opened her mouth.

Rage claimed its first victim.

* * *

><p>John winced with pity at the sound of Mendez's voice ringing through the canyon. The young Spartan knew anger when he heard it, particularly in the voice of his CO. He turned.

_Ten feet down the slope, Kurt-051 was standing, shoulders braced beneath his full battle gear, facing Mendez. John couldn't see his compatriot's face, but he knew: Kurt was terrified. John snorted to himself quietly; Kurt was the odd duck among them, always friendly, always being personable, always distracted. Now his lack of discipline was catching up to him. John took a moment to assess what was going on â€“ then he saw it. _

_They had been in the field for seven days with limited rations, marching through the high and dry air of the mountains of Reach. It was the peak of the dry season, only adding to the heat of their drill. Kurt had taken off his helmet and sat it down at his feet while resting, waiting for Mendez's next order to move out. _

_One problem: they were supposed to be at full combat readiness for the entire eight day op. They were treating the maneuver as if it was actual combat, and Kurt had committed Mendez's cardinal sin.

_Never take off your helmet. _

"_So," Mendez was asking, voice dripping with sarcasm, "What's this at your feet here?"_

_A moment of silence, of hesitation. The fear rolling off of Kurt was palpable. "Where's your answer, Spartan?" Mendez snarled. _

"_This is my helmet, sir," Kurt replied quietly. _

"_Ha! No way in hell that's a helmet!" Mendez laughed derisively. "Because not even the dumbest shit-eating rookie in the goddamn Marine Corps would take off his helmet in the middle of combat operations! This helmet is your life, Spartan! It's what identifies you to your teammates and protects you from your enemies!"_

Another long moment of silence, and then, Mendez grinned. Even John, as far off as he was, could see: that was not a good smile. The thirteen-year old wondered at that. Mendez didn't have a good smile, as far as he knew.

"_That's no helmet, no. That's a fecal collection unit, a goddamn chamber pot. Gotta be. No one would be so half-assed as to leave his helmet off in the middle of the field, in goddamn disgrace, just lying there brain-pan-up like a dead crab!"_

Then, quietly: "It's a chamber pot. Fill it."

_Kurt just stared for a moment, dumbfounded. Mendez, though shorter than the fourteen year-old boy, was a lot larger " but he didn't need to use his bulk to wield his authority. _

"_I didn't stutter, Spartan."_

_Kurt complied. But he had been in the mountains for seven days with barely a mouthful of water every morning, and his stream was pathetically weak. Mendez laughed again as if he'd completely flipped his shit. _

"_Spartans!" he called, turning and facing the entire team spread out on the hilltop. "Help your teammate out " you're a goddamn team, aren't you? Act like it!"_

They all jumped to, hurrying from all sides. Male and female, they all awkwardly clustered on the upturned helmet and their weak streams of urine joined Kurt's, dark channels on the sweat-stained skull harness that trickled down the visor into the brainpan.

Then, Mendez made them line up and lay their helmets at their feet, including Kurt. The XO stood at one end of the line, almost shouting as they slowly began to stand abreast. "You can't seem to understand that you're all a team. One individual failure means the whole damn team might as well have failed, you hear me? You think the Rebels won't take advantage of one single mistake? They've been at this for decades. Don't think they can't rip you apart just because you've gotten some special attention!"

_He stopped and seemed to consider something, remained silent for a

moment as the Spartans finished lining up. A helmet lay at each one's feet. John had taken the second position in the line, right next to Kurt. He would have glanced back to see how his team was doing, but he refrained, knowing that he would only draw the wrath of Mendez._

The XO took a deep breath, and for a moment, he did not seem angry â€“ only sad. "Kurt wasn't the one who failed here. You all did." Another pause. Then: "And I swear to God that you'll all learn."

They ran an exercise. Mendez drew his pistol â€“ loaded with blanks, but still heavy â€“ and double timed down the line, striking each Spartan across the head or face as they tried to bend, pick up their helmets and cinch them in place before he could strike. He would arrive almost halfway down the line before the butt of his pistol would strike nanite and ablative ceramic, so he'd cycle the line and start again, this time with the unlucky one who had gotten their helmet on at the last second, until each of them had bloody noses and dark bruises forming on their skin.

_But the humiliation and the pain was melting and forging them, making them into a team. Making them into the Spartans they would become. _

_Even at thirteen, John understood this as he looked down at his feet into his helmet, looking at the trickle of blood that was pooling in the brain pan, dripping down from his damaged face. He looked left, looked right at the children â€“ twelve, thirteen, fourteen - who bracketed him, and even through the pain he could feel nothing but pride. _

John understood.

* * *

><p>John looked back over his shoulder at his helmet, lying belly-up in the dirt of the cave of Rendezvous Point Theta, and remembered.<p>

_Mendez would kill me if he could see me now, _he thought darkly. It was a crucial error. The Chief had no doubt that his fellow Spartan probably already had snipers moving into position, if they weren't already there. Damn. He'd not been cautious enough. He'd underestimated his enemy, and if he wasn't extremely careful, he would soon be paying the price. He had forgotten to play as part of a team.

"Look," Gene Roe muttered softly, bringing the Spartan back to reality. "They got us on all sides, now." The medic made a slight gesture to the north, but he seemed relatively unconcerned.

The Master Chief grunted. "Is there any other exit from the cave?"

Maximus nodded. "Indeed. I uncovered what looks like a maintenance port in the rear, as if for Sentinels."

"Good," the Chief replied, his mind quickly formulating a plan.

At this point, it didn't really matter how Jack had followed him. It vaguely occurred to the Spartan that he'd probably tracked Ulee, Roe, and Maximus on their way through the forest, but it was all a moot point.

He kicked his tactical mind into gear. What would Jack's next move be? He would absolutely have to capture John; otherwise, there was no way that Cortana could be guaranteed to be brought back intact. And John had a distinct feeling " instinct, as it were " that Jack would only strike a killing blow on the Chief if he had no other option.

If he assumed that there was no exit from their fortification, Jack might go for a frontal assault: bombard their position to make them keep their heads down while some elite group " ODSTs, maybe " moved forward on the ground to ascend the rockslide and make a capture attempt. Again, John was sure that he himself was in no immediate danger, but those around him... most certainly were.

But then again, that wasn't entirely like Jack. John knew his fellow Spartan well, and the overarching theme of Jack's domestic tactics was that he never played by the rules. Jack would exhaust every option possible to meet his ends, whether it was force or diplomacy. But then, Jack's intra-species strategy, as far as John knew, had always been straightforward: quick, brutal destruction coupled with an impressive grasp of just how to manipulate a situation to his will: the art of the contingency plan. And John knew nothing of how Jack conducted himself in the fields upon which ONI Zero had thrust him.

The question remained: which route would Jack take?

"Here's the plan," the Chief began. "Ulee and I will stay up here and hold Jack's attention for now." "Maximus," John said, catching the brute's attention. "You and Gene get into the maintenance tunnel and start moving. I don't care where it goes, just follow it. Stay left if you have to make a choice. We'll follow as soon as we're able."

"Very well," Maximus replied.

"The question is, will that little hole fit your fat ass?" Roe asked, grinning, as they turned to crawl away. Maximus snorted by way of reply.

John watched, tense, as the two slid back from the crest into the cave. There were undoubtedly several places on the hills beyond them from which a well-positioned sniper could hit them, but John hoped that they had gotten in gear before any could be in place.

After a moment of tension, the two cleared the open space and arrived in the mouth of the cave, Maximus leading, Gene Roe close behind. They were free and clear. But on his way out, the brute paused at John's helmet, and slid it back across the dirt to him.

John looked back, nodded his thanks, thought, A brute. Playing like a part of a team. Damn.

The brute pulled his lips back in a fierce imitation of a human grin, almost as if he'd heard the Spartan's thought. "Good luck, Demon," he

chuckled, and disappeared into the darkness.

* * *

><p>"India Bravo seven-niner to command. He's retrieved his helmet from the bee-kay. Should I take the shot, sir?"

Jack shook his head, tapped into TEAMCOM. "Negative, seven-niner. Too risky to the package. You are our last resort, are we clear?"

"Yes sir," came the subtly weary response.

Jack sighed. The understanding that this was supposed to be a capture operation rather than a kill-job was something he was having trouble communicating to the ODSTs under his command. They had not reacted well when a retrieval squad had brought back the bodies of the two Marines the Chief had offed in their mid-air battle. But Jack also knew that the prejudice there ran deep. The ONI agent planned on harnessing it... but first, it had to be brought under control.

Time to move, he thought. Jack turned to Sergeant Holmes, who was standing to his left. "Get me an open channel."

* * *

><p><p>

"What are they doing?" the Master Chief asked 'Dakol. The elite was still peering through the scope of his Stanchion sniper rifle, breathing soft and slow to keep his sights steady.

The elite sighed, frustrated. "There is movement amongst the trees. They stay just out of sight. I do not - hold... the leader emerges. A Marine is with him."

The Chief waited for more. It seemed that his prediction was playing out.

"They stand completely exposed. I have them in my sights... an easy kill," 'Dakol said, dropping his voice a full octave. The blood-hunger was easy to read.

John looked at him carefully. He had heard this voice before, the dark, tearing voice of the predator ready to strike. And as much as he longed for 'Dakol to pull that trigger, he had to wait. He had to hold out and wait for Jack to make his play. This was about buying time - and the more Jack gave them, the better.

Suddenly, a blue icon appeared on his HUD: a handshake protocol from a broadband open channel.

Jack. It had to be. Now for the play.

John tapped Ulee on the shoulder. "I'm getting hailed. Let me patch you in." The elite nodded once without looking away from his sights. John quickly calibrated their channel into a single circuit, saying, "This has got to be a ploy. Keep an eye out." He received a grunt as acknowledgement.

Then, taking a deep breath: "Sierra one-one-seven here. What do you want, Jack?"

* * *

><p>"What do you want, Jack?"

The ex-Spartan almost sighed, but refrained. He had to put on the Negotiator now, play the distraction while his ODSTs got in position. Go for the jugular " both verbally and physically. So... start right off with pain._

"John. Why did you kill my men?" Jack asked quietly, knowing the guilt John had to feel over that. The emotions associated with the question would point John in a different mental direction.

At the other end of the channel, there was a long moment of silence. Then: "I didn't want to. You forced me."

Jack kept a straight face. The game was on. "John... before that happened, you could have just turned yourself in and I would have not said a word. But I have two dead men on my hands, and they have families, John. Those families are going to want to know why in the hell their fathers, husbands, brothers had to die. What am I going to tell them? Because the Master Chief wouldn't hand over a damned computer?"

More silence. Just the sound of the Chief breathing. Finally, a reply: "Cortana is not just a computer, Jack. She's just as much sentient as you or I."

Jack snorted with contempt; only half of it was a put-on for the game. "You can't be serious. Are you trying to tell me that you believe that the continued existence of this computer program is more important than the lives of the Marines that you just snuffed out?"

"I told you, Jack. HIGHCOM is wrong. She is not rampant" she's achieved sentiency; she's not a threat. Why are you wasting time chasing me when we could be working on the real problem here: stopping the Flood?"

Now it was Jack's turn to be silent. Upper-atmosphere scans from the Montana had indeed indicated that there were large amounts of abnormal thermal activity taking place on several of the upper ventral sectors of the Ark. The Flood was indeed drawing nearer with each passing hour, and Jack was certainly feeling the pressure of that. But then, that's what HAVOK tactical nukes were for. The securing of Cortana was the issue; the more quickly that could be accomplished, the sooner the Flood could be dealt with. Priorities.

"John, listen to me. I am trying to save your life, if you'll let me. Come down from there and turn Cortana over."

"No."

Jack gritted his teeth. Only three of the nine signals on his HUD were green. He needed more time, and John was simply not cooperating. He let frustration creep into his voice. "John, even if she is

sentient, there is no way that she is more valuable than the human race right now, do you understand? She is unstable, and she is therefore a threat! I know that you know just how dangerous a rampant AI is! Do you think HIGHCOM would have taken the time to send me if they weren't serious about it? Are you telling me you have more love for a silicon chip than for the human race?"

Now, the silence was deafening.

* * *

><p>The Master Chief was a man of few words but many thoughts. A torrent of these thoughts was beginning to build up in him â€“ or, rather, he was just now recognizing that it had been building in him. Building against the dam of his heart for days now, those days that had felt like years, raging against the senselessness of this. Raging against his calm demeanor.</p>

Jack was very carefully and very skilfully chipping away at that dam, piece by fragmented piece. The tactical aspect of the situation still kept piecing itself together in his mind. Jack was trying to buy time, trying to keep the Chief off balance. But John still had the trump card in the fact that Cortana was not with him. Every second Jack spent here, chasing him, was a second that Cortana had to flee, and thus, every second that Jack spent attempting to neutralize the Chief simply played into the Spartan's hands.

The Chief gritted his jaw against the raw anger that he felt. It felt like years since he had truly been angry, but he knew that it had only been a week at the most â€“ since the doubt and fear and grief he felt had unleashed itself in the bowels of High Charity.

And once again, his human side â€“ John â€“ was preparing to break through the Chief's facade.

The words came to him suddenly, hot and harsh and heavy, _meaning _to hurt, _trying _to tear apart the bastard down below who represented all of his frustration. He distantly recognized that this bitterness had been swelling in him for some time now, and that realization overrode his training. He finally opened his mouth.

Years passed through his lips.

"You fucking _ass. _How _dare _you talk to me about what is important. I know just what is _important _far more than you will ever will, you _honorless_ bag of shit. _Humanity _is important. And _what makes us human_ is important. You obviously know _nothing _of that â€“ only a _waste _of lifebreath could murder his brothers and sisters _in their sleep _and then talk to me about _importance. _Fuck you. Fuck HIGHCOM, _fuck them all. _

"For the first time in my life, I've gotten a chance to be a real human being instead of a goddamn automaton, and I swear on my grave and yours that I'll be torn apart before I let you within _miles _of Cortana. Not only that, but I will _still _stop the Flood because I have spent my life serving the _humanity _that you claim to represent, that you claim to love! Why? Because I _fucking understand _what's important!

"Do you understand the word _love? _You're married, but I don't think

you even get a single _iota _of what that could mean. Does your wife know what you do for a living? Does she know that you're paid to put bullets in the brains of people who had their lives _stolen _to fight for you? What in the hell makes you think you have the right to rob _me _of the chance that you got â€" or Cortana, for that matter?

"I have a rifle whose sights are pointed at your fucking skull right now, and I swear to you that that MJOLNIR armor you're wearing â€" in _mockery _of the SPARTANS, by the way â€" will not stop that bullet.

"You have five seconds to get the _fucking hell _out of my sight. Starting now."

The mouth closed, the channel ran dry. This was catharsis. The Master Chief stopped playing the game.

Ulee 'Dakol spared the Chief a simple glance. "Well said."

John could only nod quietly, feeling the dull, empty feeling in his chest and intimately knowing the pain he'd just caused â€" but not regretting it. He knew that it was all true, though it was not something he wanted to tell himself, much as the rage was not a part of himself that he wanted to accept. He would rather not think about it.

So he let it flow out of him. He took the anger and pushed it aside. He took the loneliness, held it for a moment and let Cortana's face fill his mind, then pushed that aside as well. For now. And finally, he took the past and all the years of glory and pain, victory and defeat, and threw it out the airlock of his mind. He had Cortana yet safe from his enemy â€" and that was what he was here for. He looked toward Ulee Dakol, took a deep breath, and forced himself to let go.

Then, cleared of his bitterness, with reverence, with gratitude, without malice, without fear, the Master Chief went forth to war.

* * *

><p>At the close of the words, Jack's channel went dead. He took a moment to breathe through the fury.<p>

Then: "Dammit." But the game worked. He had gotten the time he needed. And something in his mind... an illusion had died. In one sense, this game had worked. But in another sense... _Terri..._

He wasted no time getting behind the cover of the trees.

But even when moving to protect his own life, Jack was still watching the green lights in his HUD. The ninth light was lit, the final signal that Jack needed to end this nightmare. Home and Terri swelled in his chest for a moment -- _"Do you understand the word love?"_ â€" then he carefully breathed it out. Focus.

He spared a single glance at the peak of the rock slide, sighed deeply, to no one in particular: "I'm sorry." The words fell heavily from his mouth. Then, tapping into TEAMCOM, he gave the order: "Go."

* * *

><p>Jana Hook didn't let go of Dari's claw for the first mile. She ran it in four minutes, even weighed down with her pack and hauling the grunt behind her. Only when they reached the mile-and-a-half mark did she finally let go of Dari's hand and found, to her surprise, that the grunt easily stayed beside her, using his front claws like a monkey to keep the pace.<p>

Her heart was in her lungs and she ran with the tears streaming down her face, weeping yet not knowing why, betrayed, enraged... afraid. Her booted feet pounded hard over the rough terrain, and she stumbled in the dirt, over vines, finally tripped over a rock and went down hard, slamming into the ground.

Dari skidded to a stop just past her, turned. He clumsily hurried back to help her â€“ an odd contrast from his graceful running mere moments ago. "Is Jayna hurt?" the grunt asked worriedly, his Basic as clumsy as his attempt at walking like a biped.

The ODST struggled to her feet, took a deep breath. "No, Dari... I'm OK... but we need to keep going."

The grunt wavered on his feet, uncertainty in his eyes, and Jana was sure, panic. "Why Briggs try to kill us?" he asked, voice quavering pathetically.

The question stopped Jana in her tracks. Suddenly, her mind was less on running, and more on why she was running. The Animus. Briggs' word versus the Master Chief's. She had stood up to Briggs unthinkingly, unquestioningly...

Cortana. Suddenly, the sensation of the icy rush came back, and Jana was realizing: she made her choice, and now, she was going to pay for it. "Damn it..." she murmured.

Jana had overreached. She had been looking at this situation all wrong. In her mind, they were still a unit, still under the command of Sergeant Kramer, still working on the same job they'd been on for decades: fighting the Covenant, defending humanity.

But this... this was a different game of grifball. Everything was shot to hell, all of it. The unit, the "mission," her career, her life, everything. She took a moment to think back to how hastily that group had been cobbled together shortly before Forward Unto Dawn and the Sangheili Home Fleet had passed through the portal to this place. How quickly they had all bonded into a unit in the short time they were together â€“ and how quickly and easily it had fallen apart.

This, she realized, could be boiled down to a single essential pair of elements: the Master Chief â€“ and, by extension, what he wanted to do â€“ and the UNSC, and what they wanted to do. She had been pinned between the two without realizing it, and now, when she and the other wild cards in this game had been put to the test of whose side they were on...

...she had jumped onto the side that was outnumbered.

She shook her head. This was always her way â€“ joining up with the

underdog, thinking with her heart instead of her head. But then, remembering the agony in Cortana's voice, and seeing the slump of the Master Chief's shoulders as he handed off his precious cargo to her... this was not a simple choice she needed to make.

Her heart swelled for a moment, remembering her brother, Patrick. He'd joined the Marines at nineteen, came home one day and just announced that he was going, and that was that. It later came out that he'd seen holovids of the SPARTAN-II's in action, and he had wanted to "do his part" for humanity. A crazy, idealistic notion, yet he didn't let it go. That was his way. He knew what his values were -- knew what was right, and what was wrong, and did it. Every time. Every single action he had ever taken had been defined by his heart, up until the fateful day he died, shot to pieces by a pack of Jackals. Hell of a way to go.

And what would Patrick do now? Jana wondered -- then stopped. She didn't even need to ask that question. She knew.

And so she needed to get into gear. Only one place to start.
"Cortana?"

* * *

><p>A computer is, by definition, a machine designed to compute. It is a non-sentient, non-thinking tool of mankind to accomplish set tasks using programs.</p>

An AI is, by definition, an artificial version of human intelligence: a synthetic human being if you will. A very complex program that is designed to, for all intents and purposes, act, behave, and think like a human being.

The old AI's were limited: held back by a contained set of processing power and the lack of vision on the part of their programmers to enable them to expand their own handling capabilities. With class seven AI's, the game changed. They were no longer limited to the bounds of their initial program. They were self-aware. They were... alive.

Some -- most -- just didn't know it yet. A few had found out. A handful were learning what that meant.

Only Cortana knew just how much self-awareness could cost.

An AI -- a computer -- is designed to operate within a set series of rules. If factor A acts in one way, then B will naturally follow. If factor C involves itself in the situation, then D, E, and F could possibly occur. It was all pure logic and situational processing, probability and mathematics.

But... when rage, when pain, when joy, when misery... when love... entered into the equations, an AI had to completely relearn how to think. Things did not make sense. There were no logical causes and effects. The old algorithms, the old heuristics, ceased to apply.

Cortana had reached that point. The reality of what was happening to her was beginning to sink in. The overlay of emotions on her logical processes and algorithmic analyses was finally beginning to grow more

and more translucent. She could now see through the Rage, though it still consumed, influenced, and controlled her.

Several things were becoming clear. First, she desperately loved Master Chief Petty Officer John 117. She did not understand how this was possible, or if he even returned her feelings â€“ though she suspected that he did.

Second, ONI was trying to destroy her, and by extension, keep her separated from John.

Third, Corporal Hook had just put her life on the line to protect her. Things were going to hell in a handbasket. Jana now was in need of _her _help.

And now, holding herself rigid as she quivering with frustration and fear in Corporal Hood's mind, she was finally beginning to understand how this was going to work.

After all, step one was admitting you had a two: kick ONI's ass.

"_What's up, Corporal?"_

End
file.